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Gestures in the looking glass

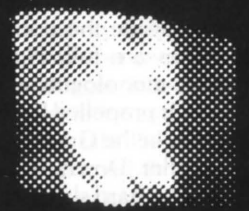
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***GESTURES
IN THE
LOOKING
GLASS***

Performance
Art
and the
Body



by **DOT TUER**

In Parkdale, there are no movie theatres, no bookstores, no gallery spaces. The locals meet outside the donut shops, at the drop-in, in the bars. Park benches are full. Hookers stake the corners. There are drunken howls, monologue raps, spontaneous combustions. A man in a wheelchair propelled by two huskies cuts a path through the lingering crowd. In the Green Machine booth a slim, bedraggled man practises ballet. Down the block, a couple fights. She slaps him across the face, a hard slap on each cheek. He goes as if to hit her, but they collapse in an embrace, tall imposing figures dissolving into baby-faced tears. A wild-haired woman tiptoes barefoot through the snow, gathering brown leaves blowing in the street. Fleeing the peeling paint and four cramped walls of the boarding houses, restless from medications, ex-psychiatric patients are gathered outside a mental health clinic two hours before it opens. One sits down in the middle of the sidewalk. Another directs the evening traffic. A woman takes aim and swings her purse at invisible adversaries. The silver screen and the pavement meet at Queen Street corners where street 'actions' become a performance without choreography.

Performance art as a practice, as a history, becomes like an imaginary evening in Parkdale condensed to a description. The Body as ... Alchemy, Ritual, Transgression, Exhibitionism, Repetition, Voyeurism. These are the isolated signifiers of the 1970's which become the catch-phrases of the '80's. Forgotten events are sensationalized as extraordinary incidents. Performance art, like a line from a bad B-movie, has only its memories. The 'raw' body becomes tamed as an imaginary site of presence, de-territorialized in the remembering but expropriated in the re-telling. Narratives which weave the body into the fabric of socio-political structures are disavowed. Documentation re-invents the context. The 'de-materialization' of the art-object, slipping towards transgression, becomes the body's idealized representation. The body's occupation of a representational ideal within Western philosophy guarantees its re-materialization. The body becomes a rhetorical device we inhabit like wearing a favorite jacket frayed over time. It becomes a paradoxical site in performance art: at once the vanishing point of its history and a framework for its authorization.

Once we were subjects to a History of binary divisions that Christianity stormed and philosophies besieged. And the body was the war-zone, torn between flesh and spirit, good and evil, presence and absence, subject and object. Women were weak, with only one of Adam's ribs to encase a suspect womb. Men were innocents wandering in a corrupt wilderness of physical temptation and spiritual acclaim. But as rumour would have it, the rap about the body shifted in the twentieth century. Spirituality fell out of the sky and landed on rationality's lap. Darwin's theories of evolution and Einstein's relativity disrupted a family compact between religion and science. Marx analysed the material conditions of oppression, and Freud shouted an hysterical eureka at the discovery of bisexuality and an unconscious psyche. The body was disrobed of its innate morality, but it was not left naked. For sexuality and gender conspired to re-instate morality as an organic imperative of the body's biology. Pavlov barked and Skinner stood to attention. Object-choice became pivotal to a heterosexual order and pathology became the property of the asylum rather than the mystery of the shaman. The 'masses' became weighed down by the heavy garments of conflicting ideologies and subjectivity became steel-toed boots that kicked the body where it hurt. Language, sprung fully formed as the 'new' science, the heart of the legal system and the rhetoric of power, began to distrust the body as a site of resistance. The body became abstracted, but not disentangled from its genealogy.

We no longer spoke of the body, but were subjects to bodies of discourse, of knowledge, of history, of difference. Modernism erected a wall of form to shore up the ego's disintegrating centre, floating between mis-apprehension and mis-recognition. Mass-media superimposed the mechanics of representation upon the reception of information. Technology superimposed the mechan-

ics of communication upon perception. Genetics framed evolution through mutation. Sexual difference located the vanishing point of the body in the male gaze, in woman's absence. The post-nuclear age begat the post-political paradigm begat the post-modernist theory. Political positions, sensuality, physicality, became ghost towns in a gold rush of fragmentation. The body was squeezed, flattened, a two-dimensional icon on a billboard, an image on a screen where substance became an illusion of light. It became attached to a vast influencing machine where state and capital joined in a sprawling and incomprehensible system of invisible levers and pulleys. The organs of the body disappeared, then its gender, traces remaining in the microchip readouts of vital statistics and credit ratings. Finally, there were no longer bodies but only narratives of the subject, swirling around the decomposing corpse of venal sin.

For some, the body appeared lost through a lack of access to these narratives, becoming an object wrapped in newspapers that subjects stepped over. For others, the narratives were all-consuming. The body did not vaporize into a malestrom of indifference but became elided through commodification. Flesh became a fetish, a signification: of wealth, of status, of success, of beauty, of youth, of difference. The elixir of immortality became grafted onto a body dissipated by illusion. Bodies still died and babies were born. Sex was performed. But in the wasteland of codified pleasure intimacy became pure imitation. Narratives embalmed the body in a murky tomb of religion, technology, biology. Collusion became the will to power, occlusion the imperative of the new morality. Torture, starvation, disease, war, became 'abstractions' to represent the body of the 'other' in First World media. For those suffering from these abstractions, the physical body superceded narrative. For those watching on television, the body assumed an immunity to the flesh through the inoculation of representation.

It is somewhere in this fictional territory, this dystopia, between description and retelling, between the narratives of the subject and representations of the body, that a context for performance art emerges in the 1980's. But in negotiating the distance between its own imagined golden age of history and this contemporary location, performance art faces the threat of obsolescence in an art world context. Squeezed between the return of the art object and the disavowal of the body, performance art has become a bit-part actor in a bad western. It stages a theatre of presence only to uncover a representational minefield where flesh and radicality are defused in a critical framework of 'endless appropriation.' It fights against an eviction notice in a redevelopment scheme where reruns are popular and objects are historically overdetermined. It is a prospector seeking a stake through the body in a postmodern terrain where illusion has become the new Truth and reproduction imitation. The performer, in using his/her physical presence in the construction of an art piece, must account for an increasingly immobilizing configuration of political and rhetorical narratives which designate the body as a glitch, a bug to be ironed out. For this fictional territory of the 1980's is not a fairy-tale wherein performance art is Cinderella and postmodern theory the wicked step-mother, but a cultural construction which functions as an adjunct to the socio-political climate of Reaganite economics. As an art form with no resale value, a poor cousin to appropriation, performance must develop a strategy to survive within an economic grid of representation where simulation creates commodities and de-values the body as an artificial fiction.

It is summer, 1986. As the first wave of heat swaddles the city, humidity licks up pantlegs and curdles in pavement cracks, everyone begins to search for an air-conditioned paradise. To the movies they go — enduring endless teen comedies and muscle-bound bodies as their sweat dries into lingering smells that mingle with the scent of buttered popcorn. Down by the lake, at Harbourfront, tourists mill in orderly throngs, bodies directed by architectural design, eyes blinking in perfect unison at the white-capped waves.

Tucked away between the beer tent and the duck pond, which has defied a generation of city planners by attracting not a single fowl, there is a miniature version of Ottawa's National Arts Centre disguised as a warehouse. It is not a dollhouse, but the Ice House, promising frigid entertainment on hot days. But the word has not got out, and *True Tales*, a series of performance art curated by Christian Morrison, becomes a teutonic fairy-tale which the tourists miss in their orchestrated tour.

Morrison's programme notes suggest a context for performance which situates the body between technology and the psychotic, somewhere in the vast terrain of the influencing machine. Claiming each piece "desires to rediscover aspects of (its) own narrative," Morrison prefaces his declaration with an invocation of Artaud's three-hour performance at the Vieux Columbier in 1947. He quotes from Maurice Sallet's description of an audience reaction: "it was as if we were drawn into the danger zone, sucked up by all that black sun, consumed by an overall combustion of a body that itself was a victim of the flames of the spirit." *True Tales*, Morrison cautions after this description, "imparts a false dialectic" where "the vision of truth in the utterly fantastic is at once hopeless and bountiful." He claims a territory where the 'preordained' in language may be precluded by "a less formal body of knowledge" in the sculpting of the tale. Yet somewhere in this convoluted treatise, which juxtaposes the heat of Artaud's hallucinations with the 'cool' of McLuhanesque technology, the body disappears as an artificial construction. Morrison appears to open spaces for the body to re-emerge through his notion of a false dialectic, but an unacknowledged dualism has crept into his rhetoric. He has become the modern preacher, in his sermon Artaud is the new Christ, of spirit and not earth, and the ability to 'tell tales' is the new morality. Using the body as his pulpit, he demands the 'spirit of rigour' and our 'rapt gaze.' In old-fashioned fundamentalist style, he enfolds the body in an imaginary fabric which privileges the word over flesh, the spirit over the physical suffering of the psychotic. He throws, to the viewers and performers alike, a gauntlet which becomes an empty gesture of form.

Paulette Phillips, as one of the artists participating in the series, picks up this gauntlet. But in accepting the terms of the contract, in weaving a tale which oscillates between narratives of the technological and the imaginary of the psychotic, she entraps the body in a barb-wire mesh of rationalizations. There is no clause, no opening, to challenge an historically-ordained dualism which occupies the body of women like a virulent anti-matter virus. Her performance functions as a litany of those fictions which women as bodies take up as self-representations. The body of her performer, once found naked and public, a bronzed female Christ sacrificed to objectivity, becomes resurrected as an anonymous bureaucrat sitting at a desk. A woman posing as a middle-management mandarin, dressed as a man, this performer becomes a storyteller who tells a tale of a woman living in a city. Like a critic, she packages the de-materialized body of the woman character in a box of contemporary rhetoric. Like a psychoanalyst, the performer, as the technological storyteller, offers up a 'science' of description, a psychological narrative of a woman who occupies a body clothed in sexual difference, who is caught into sharp-edged teeter-totter of exterior narratives and internal monologues.

Visually, Phillips establishes a triangular relationship between her performer and the projected image, between the body and its fictionalized material. To the left-front stage is located the desk where the 'performer' sits, a stand-in for the woman of the story, a narrator who mediates between the video and filmic recapitulations of her true tales. Behind her, to the rear-right of the stage is a video-monitor, a beacon mounted high upon a stand like a signal tower, where close-up images of the performer's face become transmissions of distance. A wooden-latticed backdrop of black squares houses the rear-projection of a super-8 film in one of its panels. It evokes the image of a tall office building at night, where a single, illuminated window expels the stored energy pent-up from

business hours. But although in busy city streets pedestrians might strain to glimpse inside, only to see one lone executive working late, the view through this constructed window offers the audience a kaleidoscope of images. It becomes a visual collage which corresponds to both the exterior and interior worlds of the stories we are told. Thus the 'true tale' becomes a latticed narrative which is bounced off, and strained through, a sieve of electronic and mechanical media. It is a story where technology and fantasy meet in the description of a woman who is never present, whose body becomes a byproduct of subjectivity.

The narrative begins quite simply, as the story of a woman who moves to the city where "it was all quite orderly", where "sometimes she felt like she was part of it all, part of a great city." The tall buildings, which at first overwhelm her, also contain their own stories, monologues of workers whose jobs are made redundant through computers or bosses' whims. The park where she sits to read a book is the scene of \$50 lays and heroin addictions. But it is we as the audience listening to a narrator, and not she, who are party to these other tales. And so the orderly construction of both the city and her life does not disintegrate through recognition of contradictions, but through her personal confusions, through narrative illusions. She wonders about God. An image of the solar system peers through the rear-screen panel. Like parallel worlds, the social controls of a highly technological society and her individualized musings meet in a post-euclidian universe where science overrides the body's projections. She cannot sleep, then falls prey to a dreamless sleep, a vampire's sleep that flickers as an image of *Nosferatu* on the screen. Is it technology or the body which has overpowered her? It is not a question she ponders. For upon awakening, sleeping beauty kissed by a prince, she begins to construct her dreams according to the desires of others — of Freud's theories, of her lover's needs — of the city which surrounds her. Her invented dream of a two-headed baby, a monster, becomes realized as a pregnancy. She becomes "a symbol of representation, a bearer of meaning," imagining the birth as the heady feeling "one must have felt participating in the suburban ideal." But the story which follows, of parents living in this "urban frontier," with their son flaunting women's flowered underwear, is not part of her tale. She ponders about God, about birth, about death. She loves and gets bored. She wakes in the city, but she has lost sight of her dreams. They are capsulized in a small window in a tall office building. She cannot, will not, know where her body intervenes as a force which questions the narratives that encode it. Truth, in Phillips' tale, becomes not a 'false dialectic' but alienated distances between women's bodies, dreams, desires, and the sculpted technology of their environments. We do not find the 'combustion of a body,' but its cold disintegration. Hot flashes of anger surround Phillips' character, but she remains throughout the flickering shadow of projected illusions. This is not a wet-dream, but the dry nightmare of a body entombed in its own narrative grave. And so, in the last moment of the performance, the storyteller as the woman lost to representation, suddenly halts in mid-sentence, and screams WAIT, whispers "everything is bad and then it gets worse" and asks "is that true?" to end both the dream and the performance.

It is December, 1986. The Bill of Human Rights in Ontario has just been amended to prohibit discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. *The Body Politic* is preparing to announce its self-engineered demise. In Toronto, the Glad Day Bookstore is being forced out of business by seizure of incoming books and magazines at Customs. *The Joy of Gay Sex* is banned. The memoirs of Oscar Wilde are held at the border upon suspicion of containing obscene material. The ERA in the United States begins to conceptualize a legal status for women which evades the prejudice of gender. They consider implementing the term pregnant body when fighting for improved maternity benefits. A Toronto prostitute who is picked up by the police declares she is infected with AIDS. The media get scent of a story, and track her down, like a pack of hounds ready to

tear a fox to pieces. Conversations gravitate towards disease, but steer away from the body. Sex becomes an exaggerated signifier one denotes through style and avoids in practice. Monogamous heterosexuality is no longer simply moral prerogative but a medical prescription. Celibacy has become the new religion. Sin is the last thing on anyone's mind. Enter Tanya Mars as Mae West in *Pure Sin*.

Mae West, adored by the movie-going public for her raucous characterization of a sex symbol, was known in the business as an actress with impeccable timing. Tanya Mars shares this knack for timing. The silver screen meets performance in *Pure Sin* in a choreography of strategic resistance to the increasing schism between sexuality and the framing of the body. Myths of creation meet the myths of Hollywood. The men, as they are billed, romp through various scenarios like choir boys in a Christmas pageant, trying to maintain dignity in a construction of the universe which only serves to underline their absurdity. Tanya Mars, as Mae West, becomes a living legend of a body, a woman who upsets the apple cart of history by using men as props for, rather than objects of, her desire. She tells the audience she used to be "Snow White, but I drifted." The men, however, are still the goofy dwarfs of a fairy-tale story that patriarchy constructed in an ante bid to establish dominance over flesh, placing restraining orders on women's bodies. By flaunting her sex, claiming satisfaction over sin and pleasure over censure, Tanya Mars as Mae West plays tricks on dualism. Her men become johns in an economy where they no longer have the philosophical cash to prostitute women's bodies in exchange for the power of narrative. Her flaunting of the body, as a woman's liberative materiality and a man's repressive spirituality, creates a context for performance where it is the boys, not the girls, who are entrapped by the historical cues.

But this sly mixture of philosophical propaganda and vaudeville humour is not a rewriting of history. Women, as myths are wont to illustrate, come off rather badly in the moral equation. Mae West as Tanya Mars as a stand-in for all the mythical stars, is proclaimed by 'the men' of *Pure Sin* as sinful, weak, destructive, night, chaos, an abomination, a vampire and an "usurper of the laws." God, the scenarios make quite clear, invented man to rule over woman and suppress her dangerous desires. The men, still buying into this genesis of the universe, romp around stage in priestly attitudes trying to send Mae West to hell while jerking off at their crosses. She disdainfully ignores their condemnation. She needs men for one thing only: the satisfaction of sexual pleasure. She toys with their repression like a cat playing with a mouse. She is a monster with the looks of a sex goddess. As a woman who was born into creation myths that stress the binary, the inevitable division of night and day, earth and sky, dark and light, woman and man, sin and redemption, the Mae West of *Pure Sin* is beyond redemption. For as Mae West, Tanya Mars counters creation mythologies by inhabiting the body of a Hollywood star who was not made and saved by cinema manipulation, by media attention, but who every step of the way subverted narrative and insured her own framing as a legend.

As a 1930's and '40's screen sensation, West defied the prevalent cinematic and moral codes of her era. A burlesque persona with a cream-puff complexion and a blond bouffant wig, Mae West created a legend out of Mae West with such lines as "it's better to be looked over than overlooked" and "between two evils, I always pick the one I never tried before." While other Hollywood leading women were mysterious, slim, porcelain creatures whose dreamy eyes and soft movements were directed towards the leading men, West was an Andy Warhol of Hollywood, using narrative and media attention to promote her, and only her, as the focus of spectator identification. She was, outside the film *My Little Chickadee*, the star of her films, 'stealing everything but the cameras.' She became famous for her bawdy wit and her playful vulgarity, which brought sex centre-stage and put men in their place. Men did not play opposite her, they played up to her, while off-stage they serviced her. Over forty when she starred in her first Hollywood movie, West was already notorious for her theatrical productions

and her vaudeville days. In her own plays narrative was an ornamental vehicle to celebrate her sexuality and dialogue was a sequence of bodily calisthenics and comic quips which ran circles around a large cast of the opposite persuasion. What Brecht was to theatre, West was to sexuality. *Diamond Lilly* was a camp *Three-Penny Opera* of feminism. She championed prostitutes as sensual and gutsy women in *Sex* and *Diamond Lily*. She epitomized and legitimized the drag-queen, featuring gays and transvestites in *The Drag* and *The Pleasure Man*. And her fascination with the seamier side of living challenged the puritanical narratives which had lockjawed overt representations of the underworld, mixed-race romances, and sexual ambiguities.

In the twenties, her plays were persistently attacked by the media as vulgar, and raided by the police. Even when arrested and jailed on obscenity charges, she was unflappable, the tireless champion and practitioner of sex. Throughout her life, she would challenge censorship and sexual/racial harassment, fighting in the courts and in the studios for productions which featured women turning tricks into triumphs, morality into parody. Rumours and mystique surrounded her off-screen personality. She is reputed to have had sex every day of her life, with thousands of partners, but she never played second fiddle to her lovers, or allowed the fictions of romance to enter the transaction. She was never a mother and ever refused to play the role of a mother, suspicious of maternity as a narrative transforming the body from a sexual presence to a "symbol of representation, a bearer of meaning." The penultimate drag-queen or the most publicly adored nymphomaniac, Mae West did not discover performance, she invented it, becoming a cultural legend and a sex celebrity in the process.

By inhabiting the body of this legend, Mars is able to undercut the authority of a dualist creation through a device which sets up the memory of a counter-narrative as the spectacle of the performance. *Pure Sin* begins with a confession by the woman, a benediction by the men. But the dualism becomes inverted, mangled. Self-flagellation, denoted by the sounds of a whip, turns out to be the position of the dominatrix, not the spiritual sinner of meaning. Transgression turns to subversion. And as the lights come up to reveal Mars naked, and men robed as priests decrying her corruption, radicalism becomes the act of putting clothes back on, not taking them off. When Mars reappears as Mae West, the performance artists of the 1970's are in trouble. As the men walk through the set carrying cardboard symbols of alchemy, West lassos one, declaring "I like my lovers tied up." A voice-over intoning the mythologies of creation sounds remarkably like Rod Serling of the *Twilight Zone*. The sexual politics and long-winded pronouncements of the oppositional '70's have become comic relief in the '80's. She herds the men, she seduces them, she teases them, she tempts them. She assassinates the hierarchy of gender and reaffirms her body as a woman without denying the power of its narrative projections. But she knows who is worth talking to, when to flaunt the body and when to align it. For long after one has forgotten the symbols, voice-overs, props, and boys of *Pure Sin*, the green-robed West sticks in the mind. Her forays on stage and her one-liners evoke a context for her body which both mimes and undermines its framing as a perfect cream-puff shell of history. For as she says to the boys, hanging off their fruits in *Paradise Lost*, she may have lost patience with the groundskeeper, but she sure has a thing or two to teach his wife.

It is the Spring of 1983. It has been several months since I moved to Toronto and began working with ex-psychiatric patients, teaching them to cook in a church café engulfed by the towers of the Eaton's Centre. I am a body without context, displaced, hemmed in by space and perceptions I can barely negotiate. A lowgrade headache is my insistent companion. Every day I walk through streets which seem foreign, hostile, unintriguing. Every night I lie in a hot bath for two hours, hoping water will thaw the body's rigidity, its state of disassociation. At work the ex-psychiatric



Ron Gillespie; *Schizophrenic Opera*; 1983; Ron Gillespie and Marty Greenspan play the card game, Crazy Eights. Photo: courtesy the artist.

patients inhabit narratives which I do not understand, which remain unexplained. They occupy bodies which are a territory of constant surveillance and investigation. They are moved throughout the city in a vast network of doctors, therapists, social workers, boarding homes, work placements, social clubs, hospitals, day treatments, group therapy and social welfare programs. Their blood congeals with a mandatory intake of psychotropic drugs. 'Inappropriate' behaviour is discouraged. Their language is a colonized discourse, a memorized litany of medical and psychologized assessments of their disorders. But the eruptions from their bodies send tremors through the empire. Their subversion is not quantifiable, for it is an invisible disruption, a constant irritation in the smooth operation of the influencing machine.

In that same spring of 1983, I see two performances at the Joseph Workman Auditorium in the Queen Street Mental Health Centre. One is a production of Artaud's *The Cenci*, using ex-psychiatric patients in minor roles. The other is the *Schizophrenic Opera*, a performance piece collaboratively produced and acted by a group of ex-psychiatric patients and directed by Ron Gillespie. *The Cenci*, with its cast of professional actors and inmate walk-ons, is an elaborate, gesturing affair. Bodies fling themselves about the stage, screaming in catholic despair. The ex-psychs, on double doses of medication to insure their co-operation, are catatonic additions to the set. The director, in attempting to represent Artaud's combustion of the body, becomes the sinister collaborator of oppression, suffocating the force with which psychosis wrenches the body from the narratives which seek to re-present it as a subject. He does not liberate the body, but dictates to it, a doctor prescribing electroshock treatments to quell the anarchistic swell. For the language of Artaud's *Cenci*, where dualism is split wide open and the body emerges like a festering sore, works against its own theatricality. It shortcircuits narrative, defying the dictator/director/doctor's de-

sire to occlude the the physical wounds of the body's electrified fissures.

In the *Schizophrenic Opera*, the ex-psychiatric patients compose a choral accompaniment to their own experiences of psychosis, but their bodies are neither clothed in dramatic gesture nor stripped by the spectacular. Abberations of a society determined to regulate imagination, the troublemakers in a vast welfare system of pacification, the chorus of the *Schizophrenic Opera* makes no concessions to classical modernism nor media representation. They perform at the epicentre of their previous incarcerations, the artifice of a stage shielding their nervous systems from the neurologist's gaze. The boundaries between the audience and the performers dissipate into an atmosphere where the psychiatrist is temporarily banished from the Oedipal drama. Streams of words pour from the performers' mouths, interspersed by activities which frame their social space: volleyball, card games, a cigarette exchange. Poetry becomes communication. Humour mingles with tragedy in a chemical production. The entire theatre is transformed into a celebration where bodily interaction is experienced as extraordinary sensation. Opera becomes a choral materialization of a world rendered invisible by the narratives of institutions and silenced by medications.

The performance opens as five bodies move slowly across the stage, scratching and picking at each other's heads, lining up against the wall. These are not obsessional movements pushed into the realm of metaphysical dance, but a roll-call of those captured in a secret war surreptitiously funded by the state. Heads hurt from the doctors' prescriptions rather than from hallucinations. Hands which seek to heal shake from medications. Movements are slowed by past electroshock treatments rather than by a choreographer's vision. In another incident, two ex-psychs play volleyball,



Tanya Mars; *Pure Nonsense*; 1987; Tanya Mars as Alice in performance at The Music Gallery. Photo: Judy Whalen.

bouncing the ball of reason back and forth to Mozart's music. A woman winds between them, caught in the middle of a dialectic she cannot not intercept. Hers is a stellazine dance, forever a body tossed between theories of genetics, of socialization, of bio-chemistry, of medicine. Five ex-psychiatric patients gather in a circle. They exchange cigarettes. This is not a symbolic act, but a declaration of an economy where cigarettes are more valuable than money, where the state has inadvertently created a barter system of coveted blackmarket goods. A crazy-eights card game comes down. One player teaches another rules he cannot comprehend. In a dialogue between the patient and the psychiatrist, the psychiatrist always wins. But, in the choral configuration of this opera, knowledge of the rules does not guarantee power. For the rules do not conform to logic, nor to history. They are born of hallucinations and charted through socio-political structures which veil their origins as a revolt against the system.

The *Schizophrenic Opera* does not seek to tame psychosis through its mediation, but to create a breathing space where bodies can foam at the mouth. This is not a sacrificial offering of burnt words,

where bodies charred by representation are left for dead by the conquering troops of social control. It is the reclamation of the ex-psychiatric patient's territory and their participation within representation. The ex-psychs stage the possibility of expressing a context where the body's refusal of assimilation with oppression becomes visible. They do not force the audience to look directly into the sun where combustion blinds and maims, but sift that explosion through their bodies' presence to create an atmospheric condition where the shadows cast by this sun became substance. Their movements are a simple choreography of their daily lives. Their language does not flail within a narrative straightjacket, but seeps through the interaction of the bodies on stage to produce an energy which is at once icy cold and gently warming. There is resistance here, but no organized site of opposition. The body becomes a slippery nexus of sensation and memory, sliding across the vectors of language like an unidentifiable blip on a radar screen. Its path can be observed, but its purpose is incomprehensible. The body materializes within a language which colonizes, within the bondage of history which codes its energy. But as bodies, the chorus of the *Schizophrenic Opera* insists upon a possibility to

bring their own experience to this representation, to counter simulation with a reproduction which frames history as a genealogy that represses, rather than constructs, their bodies.

It is April, 1987. The United States Patent and Trademark Office has announced that animals produced through gene splicing and new reproductive techniques can be patented by their inventors. One scientist has already spliced human genes into a pig. Unfortunately, its offspring were arthritic. The House of Commons is preparing to debate the reinstatement of capital punishment and a pornography bill which would make the representation of consensual intercourse between adults illegal. Baby M now has a name and a narrative within a system which chooses the maternity of economic privilege over the maternity of labour. In the United States motherhood is worth \$10,000. In Brazil a baby can be bought for a fraction of the price. In New York, one can knock off someone for \$50.00 a head. In Columbia, the price drops alarmingly. Muggers will blow you away for the \$10.00 in your pocket or for the leather shoes on your feet. A dead body, of course, is not worth as much as a live, disabled one, providing one has good lawyers. An ex-psychiatric patient fetches \$500.00 a month in social assistance. A body crippled in a car accident is worth much more. And a representation is the most valuable commodity of all; Van Gogh's sunflowers fetching \$39 million. Reagan and Mulroney's policies are spawned in an age of mass media dissemination, where technology mutates environment and information is statistics computed from anonymous terminals. Yet, growing poverty and the stream of the homeless pouring into the streets are physical reminders that the economy of the body is not a simulated circulation but a visible threat to a representation which denies its presence.

It has been months since I first began to think about the body as a site of investigation which would cast into sharp relief the schisms between theory and practice, between experience and its false economy of representation. I was tired of being a subject, endlessly re-presented and re-inscribed, abiding by the rules of theoretical paradigms. I wanted to be grounded in a physicality that was freed from the biological. I wanted to conceptualize a body where the material and the abstract were illuminated rather than masked by its historical context. Yet, as I write, the body becomes the very abstraction I wished to disavow. Words curl around flesh like a python. Every thought is squeezed out short of breath. Genesis becomes a state of suffocation. The act of producing becomes a physical aversion. My body disappears in the very maze of language I am resisting. Performance art, oscillating between an imagined history of presence and a contemporary web of appropriation, becomes similarly enmeshed in this paradoxical configuration. From puritanical formalism to pure sex, from pure mediation to pure psychosis, it seems as if there is no longer a location for the body to surface outside of its own appropriation. One can catalogue the body's histories, trace the nexus of its genealogy, locate it within a dialectic of the psychotic and technology, subvert its media representation. But it seems that one can no longer escape a chain of representation which reproduces the body in simulation. The more one searches for a context where the body will emerge as an alternative site to language, a thorn in the side of theory, an impediment to the politics of Reagan's looking-glass economics, the more implicated it becomes within these paradigms. The more corners one turns in a postmodernist maze of fragmentation, diffusion, appropriation, and recuperation, the more the body becomes a mirage, a shadow clinging to its site within mediation.

On April 25, 1987, Tanya Mars, as Alice in *Pure Nonsense*, is told she has lost her penis and finds it again. Unlike the ex-psychiatric chorus who temporarily banished the psychiatrists from a theatre of their hallucinations, Alice falls through a rabbit-hole into a psychedelic wonderland where Freud and Jung occupy centre-stage. She takes her loss quite personally, quite literally, finding the caterpil-

lar's announcement that it is a phallus, Alice, all so very confusing. When she lifts her skirt at the end of the performance, and a large cock swings from a jockstrap, she is understandably relieved. Her adventures in a world where nothing is as it seems, where tears are not real and something is nothing, has reached its inevitable conclusion within a realm of mediation. Ten years ago the body's presence was proclaimed by acts of sexual subversion and flagrant exhibitionism. Now sexuality is subsumed by an acknowledgement of women's absence from an imaginary theatre of desire and presence. But Tanya Mars as Alice is revealing that what she has lost wandering in a critical climate of simulation is, in fact, access to visible representation.

Ten years ago men in power strutted their cocks and women fought back with the claim of their bodies as a site of resistance to a patriarchal structure. When the theoretical-terrain going got rough, men zipped their cocks back into their pants and declared that the body was an illusion, a surface to be mapped. Women, with nothing gained and a body lost in a maze of dialectical manoeuvres, averted their gazes and embraced a cat-and-mouse game of deconstruction. Charcot's studies of hysteria as the pose for the camera became a site where the body's ruptures were visibly contained within the reproduction of images. Lacan's phallus, Alice, declared presence as absence and the body as an historical production within language. What men lost in presence, they made up for in simulation. What women never had in presence went unnoticed and became mourned as their absence in simulation. The body became folded back into an art discourse which privileges continuity over aberration, which trades an imaginary history as circular appropriation. It is not that the body disappeared. Instead, it became engulfed by narratives of the subject which guaranteed a smooth operation of an economy where the ideology of state and capital conjoined was perceived as an inevitable mediation.

But when Paulette's performer yells WAIT to an endless layering of critical illusion and Mae West takes on the boys as sidekicks the body's dualism is revealed as an uneven equation. And when the ex-psychiatric patients insist upon self-representation, and Alice discovers her penis is a dildo, performance art locates the body within a politic which challenges a contemporary economics of representation. There are the glimmerings of a strategy here which could be organized as opposition. For it is not a matter of changing the semantics of the rules, but taking up an antithetical position. The imaginary evening in Parkdale really happened. Hallucinations are still physically repressed through medication. Bodies are still conscripted into wars and ideologies where the flesh is vulnerable to destruction. Reproduction is not a cultural issue within representation but an economic strategy. Wombs are now bought and sold and new bodies genetically produced through experimentation. AIDS may be an artificially simulated virus produced by the CIA at Fort Detrick but its effects upon the body politic are real. Media coverage of information may be appropriated images which obscure, but lack of access to the airwaves affects the outcome of revolutions and empires. Censorship of South Africa's unfolding oppressions suggests that, for the state, representation is not simulation, but the control of real bodies in time and space.

Performance art, sliding between the contingencies of its art world context and the body's location within a complex web of lived experience and the politics of its representation, has the possibility to disrupt the art world's participation in a looking-glass economy of commodities and simulation. But, in order to challenge, and not simply mimic, the gestures of a looking-glass economy, it must make sense out of nonsense, find something in nothing. It must begin to investigate another tale, another story, where art is the wicked stepmother who looks into the mirror and discovers that Snow White is not white but black, that Sleeping Beauty has been awoken, not by a prince, but by women's desire, and that Alice's Wonderland is no Disneyland, but an illusion created by late capitalism to deny the lived body a political representation, economic survival and physical presence. ■