

POWER
STRUCTURES,
PANTOMIMES
AND PARODIES
LILI REYNAUD-
DEWAR TALKS
PERFORMANCE

The installations and performances of Paris-based artist Lili Reynaud-Dewar draw from a kaleidoscopic field of identities and histories – from Rastafarianism to Super Studio, from shorthand typists to burlesque entertainers.

Here, in conversation with Joanna Fiduccia, she discusses the ambiguities, both sculptural and moral, behind her very particular Follies, and what it means to be the woman behind the curtain

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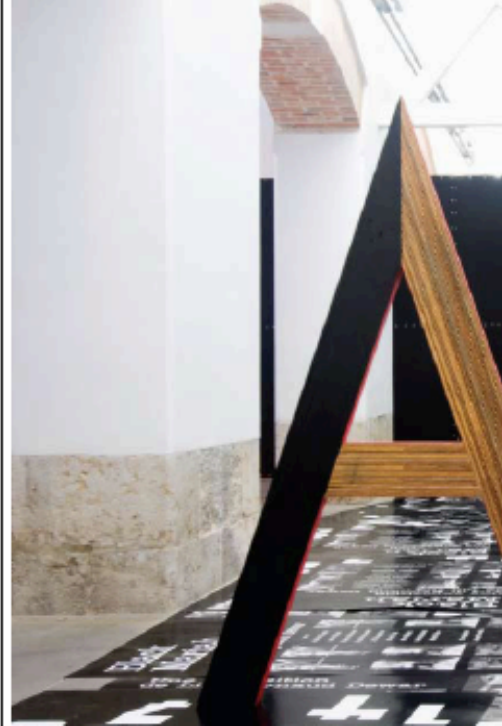
Previous page: *The Power Structures, Ritual & Sexuality of the European Shepherd Typist*, installation view, Mary Mary, Glasgow, 2009

You're the only artist I know with both a masters in public law and a substantial history as an art critic. Can you tell me how the transition from writing on the law, to writing about art, to making art, came about?

There wasn't such a clear transition. I started writing about art when I was at art school. I imagine the public law background was helpful for my writing, not only because I was used to discussing abstract and deviant concepts (public law is full of them), but also because when studying or practising public law, you need to be aware of the context, to read and learn what's been stated and said. That's how I want to practise as an artist: I want to respond to a context, to inhabit it in some way. I don't consider that I have moved from art writing to art practice; neither did I ever consider them to be two separate activities (I still write today, though mostly catalogue texts). It's an intricate relationship.

Speaking of intricate relationships, I wanted to talk about the introduction of performance into your largely sculptural practice. Why did you start creating performances?

At the time, it seemed to me that performance was inadequate and unsuited to traditional art spaces. And that it could be embarrassing for the audience. My move to performance was a strategy in that it represented a controversial, and slightly aggressive,



tool. There were also other reasons, linked to my interest in rituals and entertainment. And there was the fact that my sculptures were already too discursive, too cumulative, so I decided to make them talk and debate. As in voodoo, when a person is possessed by another spirit, there is a certain ventriloquism operating. Performance allowed me to make visible, through the different people I worked with, the fact that the work was the product of multiple and contradictory voices: mine, the one of an Other, the one of the mainstream, the one of a possible resistance to the mainstream, the one of a designer who strongly influenced my work...

Who are these different performers in your work? Are they actors, dancers, amateurs?

They are my students, my friends, sometimes my family (I worked with my mother on my latest two projects). I don't think I would work with professional actors. This has something to do with power: since they're not professionals, I can perhaps manipulate them a bit more [laughs]. At the same time, given the way we work, they can't fail at what I am asking them to do. For instance, in the latest work, I used my mother and two female students who've appeared in

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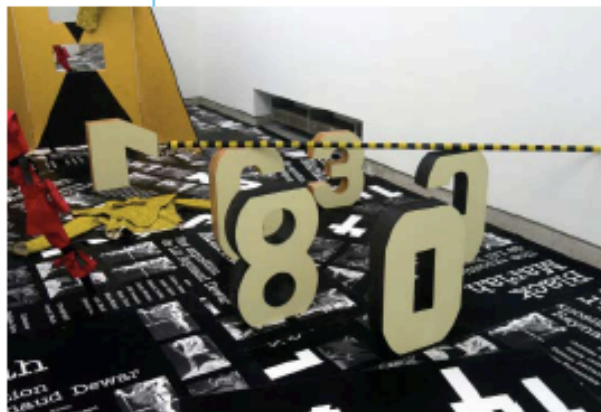
my work already. The actions I give them are very basic, and they have a lot of limitations on their movement imposed by the objects.

After the performance, what kind of status do these objects have? I'm thinking in particular of Marie de Bruggerolle's exhibition *Not to Play with Dead Things*, and of course, Mike Kelley's *Day is Done*. Are they stage sets, props, relics, simulacra?

They are sculptures more than props or stage sets, mostly because they are inappropriate for the performers: they're too heavy, they're not ergonomic, and they produce these contrived, self-conscious gestures. In short, they're difficult for the performers to deal with. I am interested in the fact that it's impossible for sculpture to be ergonomic. So for instance, even when one of my sculptures looks like a chair or a desk, it just doesn't work as such. But more generally, I don't feel that I have to define what they are. They are not dead, though maybe the exhibition space is. What matters is that I can move them from one work to another.

So you reuse parts of your installations for different projects?

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I want to aim for... a structure where everyone has a lot of freedom, where you might even join in to emancipate yourself one way or another, and where things are in constant movement
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Yes, they circulate from one exhibition to another. In this sense, they're not relics either, since they're bound to reappear somewhere else. This is complicated for the market because it distorts the notion of what is fixed and what exactly can be purchased when someone buys one of my works. Corrupting the status of things, proposing the possibility of multiplicity, or even duplicity, and risking the loss of certainty is probably more interesting than knowing what a thing is, and restricting my work to that knowledge.

Do all of your performances exist as video?

Yes, they're all filmed. But usually I film the performance while we are rehearsing and there is no audience, so they're not authentic traces. The exhibition *Black Mariah* [at Parc Saint Léger, spring 2008], questioned this notion. I showed the stage where everything took place, and I showed the performance films, the objects and the costumes, but the audience never had access to the actual performances, which took place before the exhibition opened. All that was to be seen was what we conventionally call traces. But are they really traces, given that we don't know if this is really a

Above left: *Black Mariah* (The woman's films & performance objects), 2009, fabric costume with jacket and trousers, wooden screen with paint and mirrors, painted wooden chair, leather and wooden stick, three painted wood 'A's, DVD performance documentation

Above: *Black Mariah* (The trickster's films & performance objects), 2009, fabric costume with jacket, trousers, cape and bow-tie, wooden screen with paint and mirrors, six painted wooden 'numbers', leather and wooden stick, DVD performance documentation

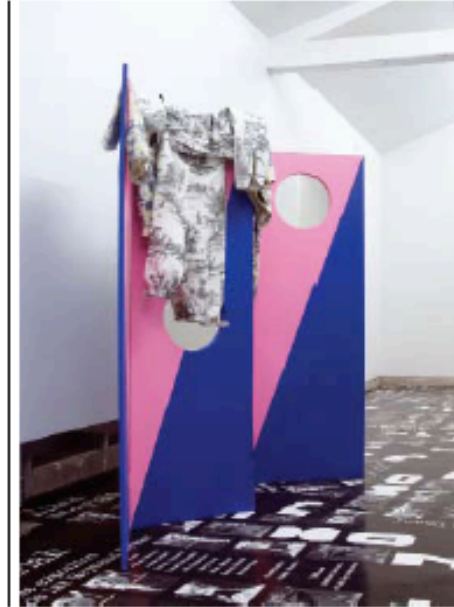
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performance? That is, is it still a performance if there's no audience, apart from myself?

Installations like *Black Mariah* marshal a lot of research, and the title of your new show at Mary Mary, Glasgow, *The Power Structures, Rituals & Sexuality of the European Shorthand Typists* is quite a doozy. How do you position your work in relation to all this historical material?

When I'm working, I'm always researching, but I don't aim to produce a deconstruction of a historical moment. In the *Black Mariah* films, the performers save the project from being something solely about the avant-garde and the roots of cinema. That's one of the reasons why I work with performers: people always look from their time, no matter how they're dressed or made-up. The performers relive the reality of today. In the end, I always produce a sort of masquerade. Politically, as an artist, I am more interested in this strategy than producing a documentary. I am more interested in fiction as a subversive means, than in its reality. There is a story about [jazz musician] Sun Ra that I like to tell. A group of Black Panther women activists were arguing that he wasn't 'for real', what with his spaceship, his surreal costumes and his invented persona.

Consequently they saw him as meaningless for the political cause. When they confronted him on this, he



Right: *Black Mariah* (The woman's films & performance objects), 2009, fabric costume with jacket and trousers, wooden screen with paint and mirrors, painted wooden chair, leather and wooden stick, three paired wood X's, DVD performance documentation

Below: In every room there is the ghost of us, 2008, set of 32 screenprints, works by Ettore Sottsass, performance by Mary Knox and Lionel Fernandez, in install on view, 5th Berlin Biennial



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replied, 'And yourselves, as Black women in American society today, do you think you are for real?'

I want to return to the idea of power – specifically your power over your performers. What kind of position, if not politically then ethically, are you aiming for?

This idea of power is taboo in art, even more so for a woman. All these notions about what is morally acceptable and what is not, what kind of identity you can stand for and what not, what's permissible and what isn't, come up frequently in my work. Lately, I've been interested in Fassbinder's anti-theatre, which resembled a theatre company except that no one is appointed a specific task. So you could be in charge of lighting one day, but the next, you might be the main actress. I want to aim for something like that, a structure where everyone has a lot of freedom, where you might even join in to emancipate yourself in one way or another, and where things would be in constant movement. But in anti-theatre, despite all its freedoms, Fassbinder was ultimately the one in charge; he decided when people changed roles for the purposes of his own project. More importantly, he understood, just like Warhol with the Factory, that a group can produce much more than a single person. You are therefore more powerful in the capitalistic world of production, leading a group – so in a way, I'm capitalising on my performers. And, in the end, just like Fassbinder, who has the power to decide who's doing what and when, I remain in charge, I decide, I have this power, and it is my project we are doing all together. Maybe that's what I'm trying to work on [laughs]: becoming really powerful!

It seems to me that this power has its roots sunk deep into the philosophical bases of government itself. In the famous passage from Plato's Republic when the lawgivers expel the tragedians from the city, there's a detail, hardly more than a sentence, which continues to amaze and terrify me. The lawmakers say, 'Honored visitors, we ourselves aspire to be poets of the finest and best tragedy' – so you are our rivals, and therefore must leave. I find this incredible: not merely that the government wishes to instruct the people as to the best life (the 'truest tragedy', as they say), but that the government announces itself as a theatre.

As you mentioned at the beginning, I have a masters in public law. What I loved about the subject is that it's immoral, and completely imbalanced. Whereas in private law, one deals ideally within a balanced situation between two citizens, in public law, the main frame is to preserve the power of the state while protecting the citizen. The situation is systematically unequal. In a way when I started to create work by deploying identities that were nothing like me, I was following the same line of reasoning. I wanted to produce some kind of complicated relationship, one that has nothing to do with public law but follows the same principle how to make it difficult for yourself.

Thomas Deeken is a writer living in New York. His latest work is [The Power Structures, Rituals & Sexuality of the European Shoehand Typists](#), Mary Mary, Glasgow, 29 August-3 October.

Above: Four typists practicing a ritual (black mask ritual), 2009, one of a set of four digital prints, edition of 30