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ART PRACTICAL

Control Room: Jennifer Locke

By Glen Helfand

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While strenuously physical, the extreme measures enacted on the body in Jennifer Locke's hybrid of performance, video, and recently, photographic work may be misleading in terms of the artist's true focus. She is most emphatically concerned with the mediated representations of experience, and the mercurial shifts in meaning that fracture subject and audience, as if in a hall of mirrors. Those literal and figurative reflective surfaces may be located in the gymnasium or a fetish playroom, but the works are held fast to formal rigor, elegant visual dichotomies, and a prolonged sense of duration that honors the pre-MTV, pre-Internet sense of pacing employed by such artists as Bruce Nauman and Vito Acconci.

Locke's works are the antithesis of messy, sensationalized spectacles. Rather they are rigorous, almost meditative actions, poetic and often studded with the levity of their absurdity. Her projects generally involve two primary tools—the trained body (hers and/or others) and the still or video camera either recording or producing a live feed. A structurally elegant example would be the 2008 multimedia performance *Minicam III*, which involved a complex intertwining of wrestlers competing while outfitted with cameras that fed into live projections in the same room as the action and the spectators.

Locke adds fluids—perhaps a classic performance art staple—as a signature element in other works. This is seen most elementally in *Fountain: Sweat, Piss, Water* (2007), a marathon exercise session. Locke is definitely an athlete and she produced the titular substances with the aid of a latex body suit, jump rope, and camera, which offered managed views of the action. Other works have employed more theatrical, Paul

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McCarthy–esque potions— including fake blood, ink, and Elmer’s Glue—in a formalized manner, serving as provocative lures for the audience and subjects impartially surveyed by the camera lens.

Locke’s artistic background taps into the rich, sometimes notorious, history of the New Genres department at the San Francisco Art Institute, where she earned her BFA in 1991 and her MFA in 2006. She readily cites her experience at the school and Tony Labat, who spearheaded the New Genres department for many years, as her most important influences.

In the fifteen-year gap between Locke’s degrees, quite a few important aesthetic developments were unleashed in the art world: the appearance of Matthew Barney, whose use of sports metaphors and sheer muscle is echoed in Locke’s unabashedly athletic work; an evolving codification of performance work; and the persistent presence of Relational Aesthetics and Social Practice, art movements that Locke subverts, thwarts, and sometimes fuses. Locke spent much of that time outside the art world, as a professional dominatrix and Gracie Jiu-Jitsu submission wrestler, which served as whole other types of education in how to stage and pace physical activity with others.

Between the ‘90s and the first decade of the twenty-first century, video cameras digitized and diminished in scale, while increasing in definition, and Locke’s work has accordingly matured visually and conceptually, exploiting the ease with which audio/visual and communication technologies get under our skin, arouse and alienate us. What follows are excerpts from a recent conversation in which she touched on many of these evolutions.

Glen Helfand: The idea of power dynamics always seems to come up when we talk about your work. How do you define the equation?

Jennifer Locke: When I first made this kind of work, I thought about it in terms of power. But lately I’m realizing I’ve used power to talk about the lack of stability in meaning. I’m interested in the way definition and meaning are completely unstable, and how the two can be inverted and turned in on each other.

GH: And so, as an artist, you mess with the relationships—the so-called fixed positions—in the art-viewing experience?

JL: I often play with the role of the artist, the model, the camera, and the viewer, and how the relationship between these four things shifts. We have an assumption about what these roles are. I’m very interested in turning those around, calling attention to them, and inverting the terms and positions. When I was initially using a video camera, around 1990, I was interested in the idea of myself as an object in front of a viewer, live or via the camera lens. How could I use the camera to not be just a passive object, but

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to play with what power my image had being in my body at that time? I had power as an object, but I was also the author of that image, the author of that objecthood.

I often set up scenarios where something is happening, while reminding the viewer that the camera is there. I'm always in control of it in one way or another. That's important; it's my hand in the work. At the same time, I now understand that even if I'm "in control of the camera," that the camera is more powerful than I am.

GL: So you're suggesting that the sense of control is, in a sense, an illusion? Or is it simply a tool to set up a situation, to make a piece?

JL: I place myself, the action, and the audience in positions that operate in service to the camera—so in a sense, I'm the camera's bitch. In fact, I've come to think of my performance pieces as live studio events during which a video is made. Because I use live feeds, the action is always competing with the representation of itself. Viewers have to decide if they're going to look at the thing itself or the representation of the thing...and the representation tends to win out.

GH: In this conversation, you talk about conceptual frameworks, and yet it's incredibly physical stuff. What is the role of the body?

JL: I tend to spend more time thinking about the structure around the actions, but the actions are, of course, very important. I'm interested in the idea of the body going through transformation in terms of fatigue and repetition. I think about what that transformation does to the body, and how that acts on the audience. The body is there physically in the action, but it exists only as a representation in the video. As humans, we really like looking at bodies; we identify with them, especially when they lose the signifiers of the everyday.

In *Fountain*, I was interested in introducing some content that was a little bit risky for me to use—black latex is a very loaded S&M signifier. But it also functions formally. I was thinking about the idea of the body being present, but totally pared down and blacked out, like a shadow or silhouette performing this repetitive action. The extreme effect that action has on the body translates to the audience, which then identifies with the body when it's being distressed. I probably use that as bait on some level.

I'm interested in somehow removing the features of a specific body and turning it into this more abstracted sculptural thing. In *Glue*, I used opaque white liquid to obliterate the body, turning it into this wet, white object. Elmer's glue is a crappy art material. It's abstracted rather than personal.

As the glue dries, it becomes more transparent. The figure—the artist—reemerges. I also used glue in *Black/White*, where I was thinking about the contrast between black and white, the body disappearing into the blackness of the space, the blackness of the figure disappearing, the white making the body so starkly white.

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Jennifer Locke, in collaboration with Daniel Blomquist. *Felo de Se*, 2008; performance, sculpture, and installation. Courtesy of the Artist.

GL: How do you deal with the male body?

JL: When I came back from my hiatus, I mostly used male bodies as the focal point. I said to myself, “I’m not really in the pieces,” but I definitively positioned myself as the author in the work. Gender is not interesting to me in and of itself, but it is a vehicle to talk about the shifting of meaning and assumption. At the time, I was talking about it in terms of power. In *Choke*, these two beautiful, physically powerful guys are engaged in this closed circuit of dominance and submission, trying to gain dominance over each other, but it’s this closed unit that we as viewers can voyeuristically take pleasure in observing. I was in the piece to call attention to the act of filming this action.

When men are objectified in that way, somehow it puts them in this traditionally feminized role. Men desire, they’re not supposed to place themselves knowingly in the object position. It was interesting for me to watch these guys who are physically beautiful, really sweet guys that I train with, make themselves vulnerable. These guys were totally willing and happy to do it without any question.

GL: How do you contextualize S&M with how your artwork developed?

JL: Whether it’s true or not, people assume I’m interesting when they know I was a dominatrix. I don’t leave that out of the conversation, but I also don’t like that to be the focus. The dynamics, however, have always been part of my work’s content. In my early work, I did a lot of exploration around control of the audience, the body, power dynamics, eroticism—or lack thereof—attraction, and repulsion. When I found S&M, I flipped out on that as much as when I discovered the use of video at SFAI. I struggled as an artist making and presenting performative work—I ran up against a lot of resistance from galleries and I got frustrated. I had come to art-making with romantic and naïve expectations. When I found S&M, I literally had a captive audience who wanted to pay me to use their body sculpturally. It was sexy and fun and really good timing for me, because I got to explore these issues in a completely different context.

The way I structured my S&M sessions is something I draw upon for my performative works. I have a list of tasks. I don’t rehearse my sessions, or my pieces. There are things I understand deeply; for example, jumping rope is something I did a lot of when I trained as an athlete. I know how to jump rope and I know how to wear latex. But I hadn’t done those two things together. I knew that was going to have an effect on the action, but I wasn’t quite sure how intense an effect it would have. There’s always a level of discovery. It’s important to leave room to find something out.