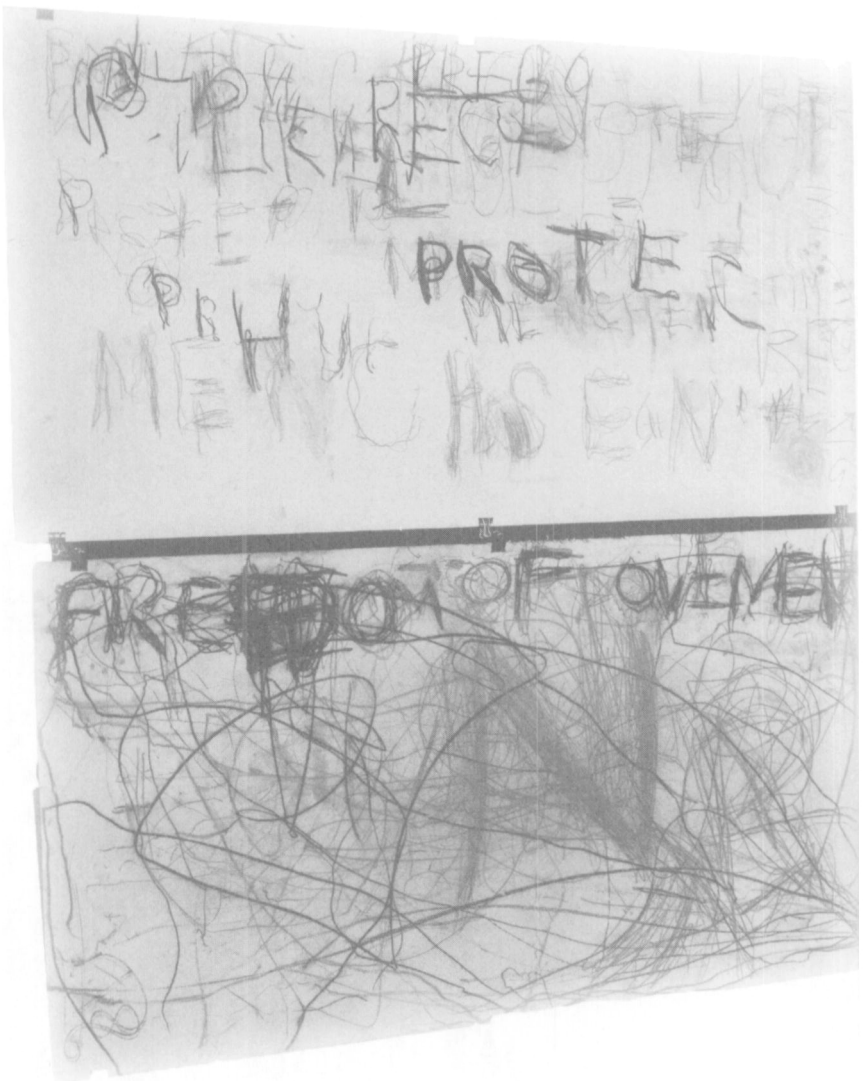
Reviews



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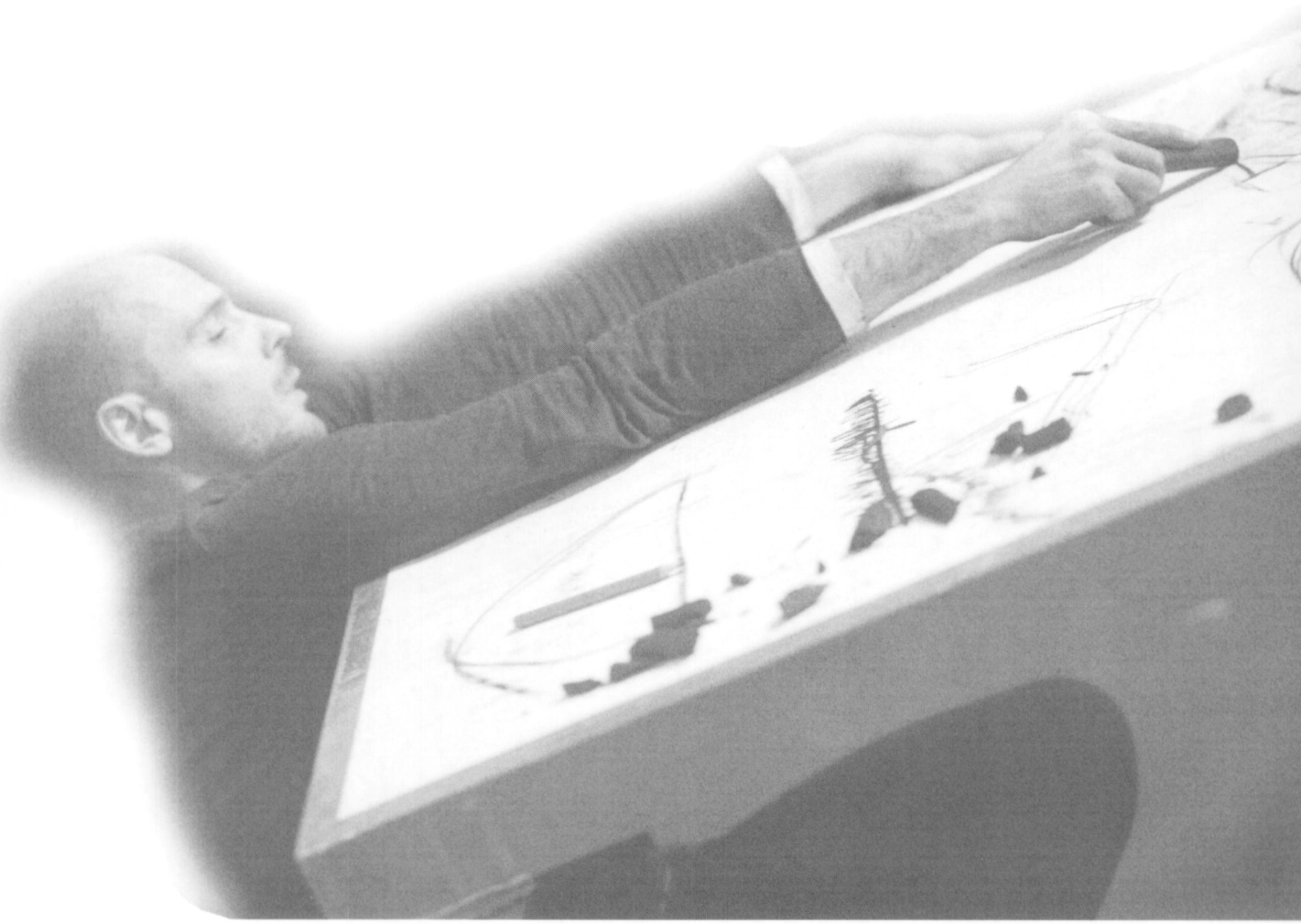

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TRACES OF LIGHT: ABSENCE AND PRESENCE IN THE WORK OF LOIE FULLER

by Ann Cooper Albright. 2007. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press. xvi + 229 pp., figures, notes, bibliography, and index. $75.00 cloth; $27.95 paper.

ELECTRIC SALOME: LOIE FULLER'S PERFORMANCE OF MODERNISM

by Rhonda K. Garelick. 2007. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. xiv +246 pp., figures, notes, bibliography, and index. $35.00 cloth.

Two new studies by American scholars on the performer, dancer, and choreographer Loie Fuller have been published; both appeared in the same year—an odd coincidence that signals new interest in a hitherto marginalized historical person. Ann Cooper Albright's book is beautifully made, with an unusual amount of care and attention to print and design detail. The cover is ablaze with yellow colors merging into orange and dark red. That must be the light onto which a photographic figure is projected, a figure whose costume of billowing silk forms the powerful wings of an archangel, rising in forceful movement and captured as an image at the most intense moment of motion. Rhonda Garelick's book is also handsomely put together. It has a dark green cover that shows us a slightly ghostly photographic negative of a female figure. This figure does not seem to move but is still, sitting on a brick wall and posing for her picture to be taken. The focus of both volumes on the photographic image of a figure—gender ambiguous in one and visibly female in the other—is of course intentional. The use and integration of photography, light, electricity, and other new technology into stage performance made Fuller famous. Whereas one scholar indulges in movement, the other emphasizes stillness.

At the beginning of both books we are reminded that Loie Fuller, who captured and enthralled a Parisian audience and the French intelligentsia for three decades around the turn of the twentieth century, has been unjustly forgotten. Both scholars therefore attempt to "reweave Loie Fuller back into performance history" (Garelick 2007, 200). Cooper Albright in particular questions modernist assumptions, in which a canon is accepted that consists of either movement "abstraction" or "expression." Fuller followed neither principle: she eluded a simple classification with her metamorphosis of performance and performer.

Cooper Albright's research method—an "embodied approach" (3)—is dictated by her own career as a dancer and much "gut feeling" (5). Her flamboyant appropriation of Fuller is physical as well as intellectual. The attempt at reconstructing, or more precisely, experiencing, the physical aspect of Fuller's performances dictates her understanding and analysis of the choreographies. The exploration begins as we witness the performer slipping into the costume and preparing for the performance; this performer is Cooper Albright. She identifies movement signatures—the "serpentine spiral"—as figurative motions (15). Her point of departure is thus the recognition that she has to "trace the inside action, the central torque and its sequential expansion into the periphery." For her, these two forces—"inside torque and outside visual effect"—put Fuller's performances in a category all their own (124) and offer a "substantially innovative and modern way of moving, one that also precipitated a radical new way of seeing bodies in motion" (15). This volume has six chapters that explore specific themes in Fuller's oeuvre: inscriptions and representation in Fuller's early period; dynamics of color and space in Fuller's dances; Fuller and the World Exposition in 1900; female strategies employed by Fuller; expres-

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sions of the self and autobiographical acts; and the future of the relationship between body, image, and technology.

Cooper Albright's view of Fuller is concentrated; she thus mentions little outside of Fuller's strict performance career. Neither Italian futurism nor German expressionism is discussed. Yet surely these movements represent modernist worlds that emerged parallel to Fuller, whose relationship to Marinetti (for instance) was significant and has seen remarkable academic interest in the past years. Music exists only under the rubric "group compositions." It is therefore impossible to find out what kind of music Fuller preferred and chose and why. Cooper Albright combines a "common sense" and pragmatic understanding with a sophisticated theoretical stance that is on the whole intolerant of other perspectives: Giovanni Lista's use of psychoanalysis is "bizarre" (128). Yet psychoanalysis is no less bizarre than feminist theory or Cooper Albright's own application of feminist interpretation.

Garelick's point of departure is her interest in "modernism," a modernism much defined from a literary standpoint. Her book is divided into five chapters that move from a discussion of Fuller's performance aesthetic, to her appearance at the World Fair of 1900, to her relationship to romantic ballet, to her bodily modernism, and finally to Fuller's impact on modern European drama. In an afterword Garelick touches on contemporary interpretations of Fuller. These themes provide the backdrop for an examination of a "series of critical relationships" (16). Garelick asks an interesting and puzzling question: Why has Fuller been forgotten? Why did she not "remain in the cultural imagination after her death?" (7). She was (and both scholars confirm this) one of the most successful performers of the early twentieth century. Yet unlike Isadora Duncan, she never became a "myth," a "legend." She is today not recognized as one of the most important and influential modernist dancers. There is no strict answer; instead the book represents the process of understanding the question.

Many of the claims Garelick makes are contradictory; that is of importance as her inability to resolve or explain these contradictions affects her theoretical frame. For instance, there is the assertion—in the title and the first chapter—that we are witnessing in Fuller "the performance of modernism." Yet what is Fuller's and what is Garelick's modernism? That of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution or a fin de siècle modernism (6), or a modernism defined by American/non-American characteristics (156)? Garelick's chapter on the Paris world exhibition during which the American Fuller was "made" is fascinating. Fuller's European impact is never investigated though. Garelick's Europe ends in the Paris suburbs. Garelick is also undecided about the role of sexuality and the creation of a public persona and media stardom. That is all the more problematic as the imperialist debate that is discussed in connection with Fuller's appearance at the World Fair needs to be examined in this context as well. Fuller, the "forerunner of modern media celebrities," never achieved the "convergence of life and art that would mark the age of media stardom" (5), yet her "marketing of her art form was indistinguishable from her marketing of her own life and persona" (121). Modern media stars (of whom are we to think?) are defined by the sexual (particularly heterosexual) persona they project (158). Fuller's "stardom owed nothing to . . . sexual glamour" (4), which is why Garelick presumably finds it vital to look at Fuller as a "sexual being" (162). Utterly unconvincing is Garelick's speculative "reading the clouds" (220ff), in which Hamlet, Freud, Tristan Tzara, and Fuller are united through psychoanalytic transference.

Both studies are admirable achievements; they rest on distinct theses, solid knowledge of archival documents, as well as a wide range of literature and thorough research. But both also display some of the vices of present academic customs: for instance, skewed language that is supposed to ascertain and prove theoretical substance. The subtitle of Albright's book hardly makes sense. Absence and presence—of what? Are traces of light missing, and if so why are they then also present? This kind of language insinuates something but knows not what. Garelick's book, too, makes use of a language that wishes to be dialectical yet is stuck in nonsensical dualisms. One example of many is a performance between the "inorganic and organic" (5).

Both studies in many ways also are unclear about their genre: they are neither biographies nor do they concentrate on aesthetic analyses; they are an undecided mixture in which an attempt is made to link chronology occasionally to substantive problems. The books are about the achievements of one remarkable individual—in her time. That "time" or social or cultural context is only ever established in selective and fragmentary bits that suit the scholar for her theory.

The focus on that one remarkable, outstanding woman presents another challenge to the scholars. Should they identify with Fuller or rather keep their distance? Cooper Albright confronts the person Fuller with her own persona and blurs the distinctions between two very different people, uniting herself with her subject in physical exertions. Garelick is more careful in this regard and also in the use of "I"; on the other hand, the lack of actual movement experience places her at a clear disadvantage in comparison to Cooper Albright. Kinetic knowledge opens a vital dimension that purely literary examinations of dance often miss or misunderstand. A very striking example is Garelick's treatment of romanticism in dance. Fuller, we are told, performed the transition from romantic ballet to modern dance—through her "externalization" of physicality (162). Romantic ballet, the surprised reader learns, "concealed technique and the physical forces in and on the body" (162). Has Garelick never heard about the main charge against ballet—made by more or less all modernists—its emphasis of/on "technique"?

Sometimes the same or similar materials and theories (both make extensive use of feminist theory) are employed, yet the scholars come to opposite conclusions, which is particularly true for Fuller's sexuality. The performance of Salome, for instance, becomes for Galerick a "whitewashed, de-erotized version" of the dancer's sexuality, whereas for Cooper Albright the same role proves interesting for Fuller's "unveiling" and revealing of herself and her sexual orientation (118). Though both writers use the feminist concepts of "veiling" and "unveiling" the body as part of feminine mimesis, they see completely different things happening. Cooper Albright draws the conclusion that Fuller's interests in "male" science and engineering and the female "vocation of performing in public" rendered her gender-neutral, androgynous, a "neuter"—and thus a lesbian (she attacks the contemporary "twisted" myopic view of Fuller not having the "girlie body" to be flaunted at the Folies Bergere and hence the impossibility of attracting men as a precondition for her lesbian preference) (121). Garelick sees only the veil over Fuller's sexuality that is consistently kept from public view; she suggests that Fuller's "most feminine and erotically available shapes" (170) suggest "sexual interiority" (179). Yet Patricia Veroli's consideration of Fuller's "negation of sensuality" as most characteristic of her performance is, according to Garelick, a complete misunderstanding of the performer's physicality (161). Whereas Cooper Albright

often refers to Garelick's writings, Garelick doesn't even mention Cooper Albright in her bibliography.

If I had to chose between the two books I would select Cooper Albright's study: it is narrower in many ways than Garelick's, but I like the opinionated stance that does not shirk from taking sides. As a performer, Cooper Albright also brings that kinetic quality to her analyses that makes for a fascinating and refreshing reading. Even if one does not agree with the treatment of much of the historical material, Cooper Albright's view is always decisive and clear. There is a stimulating energy that drives the book and the writing.

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NIJINSKY'S BLOOMSBURY BALLET: RECONSTRUCTION OF THE DANCE AND DESIGN FOR *JEUX*

by Millicent Hodson. 2008. Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press. 298 pp., illustrations. $76.00 cloth.

At the end of her book on the reconstruction of Vaslav Nijinsky's *Jeux* (1913), Millicent Hodson revisits her search for documentation of the lost ballet, a search that continued even after the project's premiere, in Verona in 1996. At last Hodson located a score of the Claude Debussy music with Nijinsky's annotations. Once the choreographer's notes were translated and minutely matched to her reconstruction score, Hodson decided they yielded less choreographic information than what she'd already collected. They'd been made at an early stage in Nijinsky's own choreographic process and gave few clues to his eventual "sculpted and contained" movement vocabulary. Not that the discovery of these notes wasn't significant. Indeed, says Hodson, they prove that history is an unfinished affair.

That affair has occupied Hodson and her partner, designer and art historian Kenneth Archer, for more than two decades. Since 1987 Hodson has been recovering lost ballets from the 1910s, 1920s, and 1930s. In the process, with *Jeux, Le Sacre du Printemps*, and *Tyl Eulenspiegel,* Hodson has constructed an artistic profile of an almost mythological figure in ballet history. As dancer, choreographic prodigy, and vortex of successive scandals, Nijinsky today is defined by contemporary accounts, later recollections of his associates, and posthumous claims by aesthetic arbiters who never saw his work. Hodson agrees with the assessment of him as a major creative force, a forerunner if not a direct instigator of contemporary ballet. But her efforts to provide us with living evidence, supported by exhaustive research, have touched off their own controversy. Nijinsky avatars have dismissed Hodson's reconstructions with skepticism and sometimes indignation, while audiences worldwide greet the ballets appreciatively.

I can't evaluate the historical authenticity of Hodson's Nijinsky ballets, but I don't think authenticity is the crucial issue. We may never be able to identify every original step. I believe that level of accuracy is of concern only to those who monitor dance in the studio. The audience is much less discriminating. What has intrigued and inspired me about all eight Hodson recoveries that I've seen is how displaced they are from whatever is taking place on contemporary stages. In any recovered piece we want to see a convincing stage work, with an atmosphere, a look, an idea about performing, that evokes another sensibility. Hodson's reconstructions may be simulacra of the original ballets, but so are the third- and fourth-generation hand-me-downs that are deemed canonical by the ballet establishment.

Nijinsky's Bloomsbury Ballet is a companion book to Hodson's documentation of her