ACTIVE SPACES, FACES, AND BODIES: UN-DOING THE FEMALE PORTRAIT IN THE WORKS OF NINA LEVITT AND JANET WERNER

Andromachi Gagas

Nina Levitt

*Wave*

1997-1998

Video installation

Mini video projector, tripod, VCR, plexiglass suspended from ceiling

13 x 9”

[Link to Nina Levitt's Wave](http://ccca.concordia.ca/artists/work_detail.html?languagePref=en&mkey=15871&title=Gravity%2C+%3Ci%3Einstallation+view+of+%22Spin%22&artist=Nina+Levitt&link_id=1836)

Janet Werner

*Lucy*

2011

Oil on canvas

88 x 66”

[Link to Janet Werner's Lucy](http://www.parisianlaundry.com/en/artists/janetwerner/work_575_lucy)
To approach an installation by Nina Levitt (b.1955) or to walk towards a painting by Janet Werner (b.1959) is to engage with space. These artists’ works occupy space, or rather participate within space and ask the viewer to do the same. The process of communication between body and the world, characterized by Maurice Merleau-Ponty as “being-in-the-world,”¹ is the existential structure of human beings and perception. In this action of mutual simultaneity between body and space, our body in every moment of its movement inhabits and expands space. The bodies of these artists, through the formal distortions of their mediums, inhabit and seem to haunt² not only the spaces within but also the spaces outside of their works. Levitt and Werner’s images elicit an embodied relationship with their viewers. Active spaces with active subjects through the expansion of the definition of looking enlist the participants into an experiential re-examining of communication.
Nina Levitt

Nostalgia

1997-1998

Video Installation

Video wall projection, LCD video projector, VCR

8 x 10’


Janet Werner

Zero Eyes

2010

Oil on canvas

45 x 55”

http://www.birchlibralato.com/artists/?artist=27&work=2216
Both Levitt and Werner deconstruct the prescribed portraiture of female subjectivity, and turn the question and space of identity and representation outwards. The female portrait has historically been represented through conventional composition and framing as an *objet d’art*, and has depicted a restrained and contained female subjectivity within a rationalized space directed towards a male gaze. There is an inherent expansion of space in the portraiture of Levitt and Werner; an active engagement between viewed, viewing, and viewer. This suggests a space of struggle that blurs the distinction between object and subject. Levitt reworks the representation of women in popular media culture through the recovery and manipulation of existing images, whereas Werner paints fictional female portraits that are composites of figures scavenged from fashion magazines. There is a trespass between the representational field of their subjects and ours. Both their works explore the morphology of the feminine through modes of re-doing portraiture. Werner paints and repaints the faces of women caught in the midst of a representational crisis through the repurposed imagery of hyper-femininity; Levitt traps the faces and bodies of women into the infinite repetition of cinematic video-loops to relive their media and socially constituted selves. Both reflect gestures of the performative, as an active engagement with deformation and fragmentation and with the viewer’s reception, re-formulation and re-materialization of the female portrait.
Nina Levitt

*Gravity*

1997-1999

Video Installation

Nina Levitt’s *Gravity* (1997-1999) is a video and audio installation composed in three parts: *Spin*, *Wave* and *Nostalgia*. This work consists of a series of video projections that instead of being restricted to stationary screens, take total possession of the space of the gallery through Levitt’s integration of the gallery’s floors, walls and ceiling as sites of projection. Entering the dark room of the exhibition space, the voice of an aria fills the room, punctuated by the sound of a sonar echo. Levitt’s subjects seem to be caught in some sort of existential predicament, entangled in an introspective search or a questioning of meaning. Levitt fractures the cinematic narrative to transpose her subjects into a space where identities are preserved in a process of becoming. By appropriating images from television and film, Levitt is pouring through the past in order to situate aspects of absence and loss. The fleeting gestures of women are exaggerated and suggest something unfulfilled. The repetition of the video loop points to memory and alludes to the trauma which resides in the in-between spaces of female subjectivity, spaces built on the paradox of the unrepresentability of women as subjects of desire because they are perpetually denied their own agency.
Nina Levitt

Spin

1997-1998

Video Installation

Mini video projector, tripod, VCR, floor covering

22 x 26”

http://ccca.concordia.ca/artists/work_detail.html?languagePref=en&mkey=15871&title=Gravity%2C+%3Ci%3Einstallation+view+of+%22Spin%22&artist=Nina+Levitt&link_id=1836
Spin (1997-1998) is projected onto the floor. This video installation is a sequence of images taken from the Women’s Diving Competition of the 1996 Summer Olympic Games. The divers are shown spinning in slowed motion into a blue pool. But contrary to the original media footage of these women, the divers in Levitt’s video never make contact with the water. The viewer is trapped in this anticipatory state of anxiety where there is never any point of arrival. The absence of that final contact with the water has the women continuously spinning in a suspended space above the water. Levitt traps the bodies of these female swimmers into a space of denial. Levitt’s temporal expansion of the video of these women can be defined as the idea that “the very structure of contemporary visuality could be dismantled.” The formal disruption of appropriated news footage and the spatial disruption of the exhibition space (we need to bend or crouch towards the floor in order to watch these women) point to a representational crisis. Levitt’s work compels us to slow down and watch, and perhaps rematerialize some sort of critical bit of visual information about these women that we may have missed because it passed us too quickly the first time. Rather than portraits of figures in a global sporting event, these women’s bodies reinsert themselves in the visual frame as portraits of self-possessed symmetry.
Nina Levitt

*Wave*

1997-1998

Video installation

Mini video projector, tripod, VCR, plexiglass suspended from ceiling

13 x 9”

Wave (1997-1998) is projected onto an opaque plexiglass screen which hangs from the ceiling, allowing the video loop to be watched from both sides. In this piece, the projection consists of the flickering black and white image of the slow motion smiling and waving of a female figure, that of the Russian Valentina Tereshkova, the first woman in space. Spatially, there is a duality to the reception and perception of these images. The viewer can walk freely around the screen and choose from which side to watch, signalling a reflection on their position within space as a spectator and the implied negotiation of that space. The disruption in the temporality of this slowed down news reel disturbs the media flow of its original presentation and creates a moment of cinematic spectacle for the viewer to watch. Representing a propagandist tool on the part of the Soviet space program in 1961, a communist attempt to beat their capitalist counterpart in the vying of the control of outer space, Levitt displaces Tereshkova as a historical figure. Levitt transforms her into a female figure that is seemingly trapped in her space suit and helmet. The wave of her naked and unencumbered hand, a banal gesture of greeting, is now made the focus through its repetition of the action in a video loop. The movement of her hand is made to look laborious; the defiance of the gravity in space is portrayed as weighty and burdensome. The freedom and adventure of the first woman in space has been replaced by the captivity of static representation.
Nina Levitt

*Nostalgia*

1997-1998

Video installation

Video wall projection, LCD video projector, VCR

8 x 10’

Nostalgia (1997-1998) is the largest of Levitt’s works, an eight-by-ten-foot wall projection of lesbian couples intimately dancing on a crowded dance floor. These images are from The Gateways, a lesbian bar in London England, one of the few safe spaces for lesbians in the 1960’s, as it appeared in Robert Aldrich’s 1968 film The Killing of Sister George. The video is slowed in motion and we are made to witness a private dreamlike intimacy between women. The video loop consists of two slow-motion sequences: a long shot of a crowd of women dancing and the close-up of a young couple dancing cheek to cheek. From the active crowded space of the dance floor, of female bodies in motion orchestrated by the freedom to show desire and yearning for each other, we are made to focus on one couple and their intimacy. We follow the way they move together and watch their faces for signs of bliss. Levitt propels these two lesbian women into a spectacularized cinematic moment, recalling the glamorous Hollywood moments of heterosexual couples dancing. But rather than a consummated closure, there is a suggestion of something that is unfulfilled through the suspension of narrative. The temporal distortion points to the nostalgia of the mourning of a once shared space among lesbian women amidst the repressive spaces of society at that time, and through its absence there is an experience of emptiness and yearning.
Nina Levitt

*Duet*

1997-1998

Video installation

LCD video projector, VHS deck, 6 un-housed full-range speakers, CD playback

8 x 6’

Levitt’s *Duet* (1997-1999) is often defined as a memorial piece for women who for various reasons lived their lives disguised as men. The artist calls this a memorial piece about the death of women. Projected onto the corner of the wall, the image of a large torso in a white shirt breathing hard and deeply is shown unbuttoning and buttoning the shirt. The audio accompanying this work is two overlapping female voices recounting the lives of various women who successfully passed as men up until the discovery of their double lives at the time of their death. The act of the unbuttoning of a shirt initially suggests something erotic, but we glimpse the hint of a strapped down breast at the last shirt button, and then the video loops back to the hand buttoning the shirt back up again. As an installation, this work is spatially expansive, yet there is a marked absence of space within the image that it is unnerving. There is no face to the eight foot high projection of this female figure. Her upper torso fills the space of the frame and the viewer standing before it is completely enveloped in-between the ghost of her breasts. The expansive presence of the shirted torso replaces the absence of the lived space that these women experienced as both a loss and a gap. This loop underscores a denial that reflects the denial of revelation of true self inherent in a disguised gender.

The hint of the sensuous in the pictorial qualities of Levitt’s stilled video shots is a beautiful juxtaposition to Janet Werner’s own work. Here too, the viewer is called upon to perceive the surface of these painted portraits phenomenologically, experientially, through subjective experience and consciousness. Werner too seduces the viewer into a corporeal looking of her subjects.
Janet Werner

*Barbie*

2003

Oil on canvas

54 x 48”


Janet Werner

*Dawna II*

2005

Oil on canvas

54 x 48”

In portraits such as *Barbie* (2003) and *Dawna II* (2005) a sexual magnetism can be traced through the artist’s brushstrokes of the women’s mouth, cheekbones and neck. These subjects are fashioned through an entrancing technical virtuosity of Werner’s handling of paint and the painterly assuredness of her “I was right the first time” brushstrokes. Werner wields an arresting deftness with light and shadow which sensually transform the fleshy tones of pink in her canvases. There is a representational naturalism to these painted works that engages the viewer in visual ecstasy; painterly temptations of full coloured stained lips, warmly toned smooth skin, and richly textured flowing hair. These large paintings enlist the viewer in a bodily relationship towards them. We, as viewers, simultaneously want to be close to them so that we can approach them alongside their skin, haptically, with our eyes functioning as organs of touch, but we also need to back away from them to optically ground the figures as the objects of our attraction. Werner’s work stresses the relationship between the haptic and the optical: the viewer’s bodily engagement through active seeing with the surface of the subject reflects a dialectical tension between surface and depth. These images of women are erotic in the sense that they construct a particular kind of intersubjective relationship between viewer and image. It is the viewer’s embodied vision and in turn embodied spectatorship that is erotic.
Janet Werner

*Girl on Pink Background*

2005

Oil on canvas

20 x 10”


Janet Werner

*Zero Eyes*

2010

Oil on canvas

45 x 55”

Alongside this visual seduction is a dialectical alert; the self composed through vision is not only a site of pleasure because alongside seeing is distance, anxiety and fragmentation. Werner implicates the viewer in the interior space of her painted subjects and in the exterior space of their projections. The work negotiates the existential feminine condition by creating new spaces of representational inquiry through the distortive qualities of her medium. These paintings firstly instil a sense of tranquillity. Our bodies in the usually white and bare physical structure of the exhibition space seek to be grounded by Werner’s female figures, which inhabit the most ethereal of spaces inside the painting. But moving closer to these figures, their faces and bodies seem to be enlisting our own perception of seeing and being to materialize and ground them. In works such as Girl on Pink Background (2005) and Zero Eyes (2010), there is tension between abstraction and figuration that initiates us into an act of reformulation in order to confront the deformed psyche clawing through its plastic perfection. Both these women seem to be trapped in the emptiness of the space behind them. Their faces are painted in the same tones as their background. One of the figures looks off into a distance in a seemingly unsure manner while the other one looks down with the vacant eyes of a doll. Werner's art practice is engaged in the process of un-doing. It has been commented that Werner’s sequences of faces seem to be emerging into subjects. Rather than being presented as coherent and unitary selves, it is through the re-presentation of the popular cultural images, on which Werner bases her portraits that these women are constantly on the move through networks of representations, gathering and scattering layers of identity along the way. It could be said that Werner’s portraits are in the process of becoming or perhaps in the process of un-becoming.
Janet Werner

*Lucy*

2011

Oil on canvas

88 x 66”


Janet Werner

*Mouse*

2011

Oil on canvas

20 x 16”

[http://media.withtank.com/ae120712f8/mouse.jpg](http://media.withtank.com/ae120712f8/mouse.jpg)
Werner has said that she is drawn to the face and portraits because of their inherently confrontational nature; portraits both are and represent an encounter with another being. In painting portraits of fictional beings, Werner’s works become more about ideas and projection. Werner claims that her work in portraiture is concerned with the ways and means of looking. In Lucy (2011), through disruption, the beautifully rendered top of the subject’s dress is a marked contrast to her unfinished and deformed face. Through disfiguration, as in Mouse (2011), the face has been smeared and fractured by the same colour and tone of paint used in the background and what remains is the ghost of an eye and the beginnings of a nose and lips. Werner explains that her struggle with process and materialization serves to create “a dialogue and tension with something else, something that is invisible.” Werner’s technical virtuosity points to her subject’s unarticulated introspection rather than her eloquent extroversion. The “anti-portraiture” of her depiction of faces reveals a purposeful failing of technical virtuosity. This failing points to the artist’s acknowledgment of the formal and symbolic ineffectuality of portraiture by disrupting the depiction of the face through an intentional awkwardness in paint handling, and the use of pastel or high key colours by which her painterly assuredness is transformed into painterly tentativeness to underline the unsettledness of her subjects. The abstraction in her work challenges the formal elements of figuration. This formal abstraction is paralleled in the perceptual abstraction in the viewer, who is pressed into the necessary act of re-figuration. There is a trespass of the subject’s representational field and our own space of reception. It is through our embodied spectatorship that these subjects can finally claim their own existential phenomenological characters of being-in-the-world with us.
Nina Levitt and Janet Werner are engaged in temporal and spatial expansions. Both of their work encourages space, and in their exploration of interior and exterior space, they underscore the potentiality of an extra-dimensional space, a sensorial space. This sensorial space is one of affect, where their body of work, and the bodies within their work, exert their own effect on the viewer’s body. These works inhabit space as a packet of affects, or as Deleuze and Guattari would say a “bloc of sensations,” 16 enlisting the spectator to reactivate them through their

Nina Levitt

*Duet*

1997-1998

Video Installation

LCD video projector, VHS deck, 6 unhoused full-range speakers, CD playback

8 x 6’


Janet Werner

*Girl on Pink Background*

2005

Oil on canvas

20 x 10”

[Link to Janet Werner's Girl on Pink Background](http://www.birchlibralato.com/artists/?artist=27&work=1514)
embodied perceptions. Therefore, human perception is experienced corporeally and bodies in space continuously transform space, and in turn infinitely transform perception.

**A PROPOSAL FOR A VIRTUAL EXHIBITION**

My approach to art has always been framed by the notion of the virtual. Art negotiates between interior and exterior spaces and extends outwards to the viewer in an extra-dimensional sensorial space of affect. By situating artworks in such a virtual space, they are no longer only objects, but rather a zone.17 This is a zone shaped by the performative actors of both the production and the reception of art. There is an open-endedness in the interpretation of art that is performative in the virtual sense, one that seeps through physical spaces. The digital exhibition is part of this spatial and phenomenological expansion in the contemporary reception of art.

Art historians have been accused of not understanding the new art of curating in the second millennium, a curatorial practice focused on the spatial understanding of art rather than the historical and temporal one rooted in time and not space.18 My curatorial strategy for this digital exhibition proposes to collapse temporality by activating these works through space rather than time. I intend to feature the works by artists Nina Levitt and Janet Werner in an intertextual environment of moving and still images and sound. Rather than make solid connections between these two artists temporally, I want to leave it up to viewer and user to establish their own reciprocal relationship to the artworks spatially.
Visually and navigationally, I want this virtual exhibition to resemble Angela Grauerholz’s web experimentation, *At Work and Play* (2008) (http://www.atworkandplay.ca/), inspired by the artist’s *Reading Room for the Working Artist*, (2003-2004), an installation of twelve artists’ books, a film projection, and furnishings designed after the model of Alexandr Rodchenko’s 1925 *Reading Room for the USSR Workers’ Club*. This installation is “reflected on artistic practice itself as a form of idea exchange or play.”¹⁹ The viewer in this web project is presented with the visualization of their consultation of images through a visual path or trace. Each of Grauerholz’s digitized artefacts possesses a unique identifier that assigns them to an address in the tree structure of the relational database.²⁰ As the visitor navigates through the site, a two-dimensional schema is constructed as personal trajectories visible in real time.

Similarly, my exhibition will set out to allow the viewer/user to participate in the secret and playful punctualities of their own art reception and to visually and spatially construct an imprint of their own trajectory, thereby inserting their own bodies into the virtual space of the digital exhibition, and equally replicating the sensuous experience of artwork in real time and space.
Notes

2 Phenomenologically, human experience, notably perception, is experienced corporeally, through the flesh, a notion espoused by Maurice Merleau Ponty. See James M. Edie, *The Primacy of Perception, and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History, and Politics* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1964). For Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the fundamental relation between body and space is not a body in space, but rather a body that inhabits space. He states: “Our body is not in space like things; it inhabits or haunts space,” 5.
6 Ibid., 17.
9 Laura Letinsky, *Space/Sight/Self/ Essays by Laura Letinsky and Elizabeth Bloom* (Chicago, Ill.: David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, the University of Chicago, 1998), 38.
15 Campbell, 69.
**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


