



Figure, Architecture, Camera: The Strategic Modes of Lynne Marsh

Lesley Johnstone

54

In one of our conversations during the preparation of this exhibition, Lynne Marsh mentioned her current reading of Siegfried Kracauer, a philosopher and cultural theorist of the Frankfurt school whom I had not previously read. Kracauer's reflections on photography and film, the dance hall and the film palace, body culture and the crowd, as well as his theories on the mass find obvious resonance in the three video installations presented in this exhibition. In the eponymous essay in his collection *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays* Kracauer discusses the relationship between the mass ornament—the abstract patterns created by rows upon rows of sexless female bodies performing mathematically precise choreographed movements, often in sports stadiums—and capitalist modes of production. Both are ends in themselves, Kracauer states; the performances are viewed as cultural manifestations of capitalism's negation of the individual. The opening ceremony at the 2008 Olympics in Beijing is the most recent and decidedly most grandiose example of such spectacles. The idea of the mass ornament is echoed throughout Marsh's works, where rhythmic repetitive gesture, anonymity and abstraction are recurring strategies. If Kracauer saw these staged events as "the aesthetic reflex of the rationality to which the prevailing economic system aspires,"¹ how are we to view Marsh's representation of the sports stadium, the dance hall, or the broadcast studio in our own post-capitalist society where, more than negated, the individual is rendered virtually obsolete?

Camera Opera (2008), *Stadium* (2008), and *Ballroom* (2004) constitute a coherent group that questions the inscription of the body in strictly codified architectural environments,

1. Siegfried Kracauer, "The Mass Ornament," *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 79.

the feminine within theatrical and performative spaces, as well as the blurred boundaries between real and virtual, physical and fantastic. Each piece involves a single female figure who activates a found architecture through her own actions or the movement of the camera. They are somewhat of a departure for Marsh, as they have developed out of her exploration of the workings of physical spaces rather than the creation of fictional, virtual spaces characteristic of her earlier pieces. For the first time she investigates the typology of real space, evoking their social, historical or cultural functions. As a point of entry, it is perhaps useful to isolate the role of the single female figure as a means of animating space in *Ballroom*; the treatment of found architecture as protagonist in *Stadium*; and the fascination with cinematography that is rendered explicit in *Camera Opera*.

The Figure as Fulcrum

The single female figure has accompanied Marsh since 1998 in her single channel looped video projections: *Cowgirl and Future Stories*, *Venus... I see blue*, *Calling*, *Screeners* and *LA* in which Marsh herself takes on the role of frontier woman, super heroine, or parachutist. The figure "performs" for the camera and is then projected, as an avatar into virtual space. Working with satellite images of Mars, Venus, the Sierra Nevada mountain range, or the coastlines of Los Angeles, Marsh explores the vocabularies of video games, cloning, virtual reality, science fiction films and super hero action movies. The female figure acts as a trope to animate these fictional spaces. In her subsequent video installations, *Crater*, 2005 and *Volcano*, 2006, presented on curved screens, the female figure is abandoned so as to locate the viewer as participant within the visual field. Creating 3D simulations from image data acquired from NASA, Marsh's virtual landscapes brought the viewer literally inside the crater of the volcano.

In *Ballroom*, Marsh, dressed in a glittering red and gold costume, arms stretched out, hangs suspended, upside-down and rotating, much like a disco ball, in the centre of the Rivoli Ballroom in South London. We are gazing at a perfect Albertian perspective, a window into the world of the dance hall, the suspended body occupying the focal point and

the rows of red lights producing the vanishing point. Movement is created by hundreds of spots of light circling the room. It may take a few seconds for the viewer to perceive the source of these spots as reflections off the sequined costume of the figure. The beams of light that periodically traverse the image and are refracted off the costume are produced not by the lights within the ballroom, as one would expect, but rather from an outside source located in the position of the camera/projector/viewer. The conflation between not only the lens of the camera and the eye of the viewer, but also the light source and projector, results in the skilful implication of the viewer in the construction of meaning. By locating the viewer in the position of that which activates the piece, Marsh renders the spectator an active participant. It is also the key that indicates a blending of two distinct moments in the creation of the work—the filming of the rotating body on a green screen and the light effects she creates, and the filming of the ballroom with its own, distinct lighting. Despite our desire to imagine Marsh actually hanging from the chandelier, we are forced to recognize the work as an illusion, as a montage of the real and virtual, producing a subtle uncanniness so dear to Marsh.

What is underlined is the central role played by the figure, a very glamorously attired athletic female figure, as animator of the space. The fixed camera shot, the perspectival construction, the blending of the costume with the colour scheme of the dance hall reinforce the figure as focus. Even the soundtrack participates in this construction, for at one point during the loop we hear the voices of people entering the ballroom, but after a few seconds this gives way to a musical track that rises in intensity to then fade back into ambient sounds. As in many of her works, the soundtrack creates a narration, producing a mounting suspense which heightens the viewer's reception of the piece. The voices of the absent dancers points to the suspended figure as fulcrum, as that which ultimately controls our perception of the space. Marsh locates the viewer as producer of meaning within the space of the woman; we become part of her fantasy. We are within the realm of the spectacle, both literally—the dance hall being in itself spectacular and figuratively—as Marsh herself becomes the object of desire in this staged spectacle.

Architecture as Protagonist

As both setting and protagonist, the impressive, and impressively empty Olympiastadion in Berlin, provides Marsh with her most highly charged—historically and culturally—found architecture to date. Originally built for the 1936 Olympics, it is a potent symbol of the Fascist use of architecture as a propaganda tool during the Third Reich. It was renovated for the 2006 FIFA world cup soccer finals, following long and heated debates about the pertinence of its restoration and the most appropriate strategies to adopt (whether to retain or negate its charged history). The architects elected not to mask its past, but rather to provide a contemporary, sober and characteristically efficient twenty-first century stadium within an historical shell. The Marathon gate, the Bell tower, the external stone colonnade, and Nazi sculptures of the original building were retained, while a transparent steel and glass roof effectively transforms the aesthetics of the contemporary stadium.

The Berlin stadium is the setting for Leni Riefenstahl's film *Olympia* on the 1936 Olympic Games in which she pioneered many of the techniques that have afforded her a place in film history despite her obvious complicity with, and financial backing from, Adolf Hitler. Marsh's decision to film this particular stadium is by no means gratuitous; it points to her interest in the representations of power and control in the photography and cinema of the Third Reich, and their continuing legacy in contemporary imaging, video games and cinematography.

Stadium is a strikingly graphic, almost monochromatic work. The opening sequence is a 3D animation of the architects' model, accompanied by a musical soundtrack that evokes the films of Alfred Hitchcock, again creating a mounting, un-explained, and ultimately un-fulfilled suspense. The stadium is presented much like a free-floating vessel lost in space. Following a moment of black, the camera sweeps around and into the main space of the stadium through the dramatic central columns. Marsh directs a camera perched atop the arm of a crane located on the playing field. Throughout, her cinematographic techniques recall, sometimes even mimic Riefenstahl's—the long circular travellings, the

sweeping camera movements, low-angle shots, the montage. She employs to great effect the crane shot, which Riefenstahl is credited as having pioneered. The rhythmic, multiple camera perspectives made possible through the use of the crane produces swirling feeling of vertigo. Once again the viewer is located inside the lens of the camera; we are brought in, over and through the expansive space. Marsh pans over the rows of empty grey, silver and black seating, while the soundtrack switches to electronic music, interspersed with sounds recalling those of birds or insects, indicating a blending of the real and the virtual. She alternates between wide-angle bird's-eye views to expose the scale of the stadium, and first person perspectives for close-up shots.

Approximately half way through a female figure dressed in a generic white hooded track suit performs carefully choreographed repetitive movements that evoke specific athletic events, callisthenic dances, or tai chi. She walks along the alleys, straddles the seats (evoking the high jump sequence in Riefenstahl's film) and in the final sequence swings her arms in a movement identical to that of the discus thrower in the opening sequence of *Olympia*. The repetitive gestures and the endless rows of empty numbered seats reinforce the mechanisation, standardisation and strict uniformity of the space, as well as function to evoke the absent spectators. As Marsh herself states there is an "uncanny dialogue between architecture and individual... a constant interchange between the performer, her surrounding architecture and their mediation through video."²

The Camera as Subject

One of the most striking aspects of these works is Marsh's use of highly codified cinematographic techniques—extreme angles, sweeping, panning and zooming shots, very precise editing, lighting and sound. Her vocabulary draws on the languages of video

2. Lynne Marsh, from her website.

games, sports coverage, television broadcasting, and the cinematography of the early twentieth century. The relationship between the lens of the camera and the eye of the viewer are at the heart of each of her works.

In *Camera Opera* Marsh makes explicit this fascination, as the cameras themselves become the subject, and the action is the performance of filming. She turns her attention to the conventions of news broadcasting and for the first time makes use of multiple cameras. An immobile anchorwoman, apparently just before broadcast, a moment of expectation and tension, stands in the centre of the set of a well-known German current affairs program. Rows of empty chairs evoke the absent audience, but also create a barrier between the cameras and the anchorwoman, between the represented and the mechanisms of representations. Four TV cameras and their operators visually dominate the scene.

From her position inside the sound booth, Marsh directs the cameras to circle around the news studio, focus on the anchorwoman, and pan out to expose the equipment, lightning, seating, and ultimately themselves. During the filming a Strauss waltz was piped into the studio, reinforcing Marsh's desire to produce a carefully controlled choreography. The cameras are in constant motion, sweeping around the central stage and spinning on their tripods. The stillness of the anchorwoman amplifies the role played by the cameras, underlining their status as true subject of the work. Although she remains the focus of their gaze—in essence controlling their movements—her immobility denies their ultimate function.

Marsh represents the studio as a closed circuit, introducing nothing and exposing but the mechanisms that are inherent to it. Through the mechanized choreography, she effectively substitutes the camera for the news script, exposing them as both vehicle and subject, just as the stadium is both setting and protagonist. What we are given to see is how the space is organized through and by the camera lens, how the set itself becomes a performative space based on a set of codified power relations. Marsh reverses the established power structures by turning the cameras on themselves. They are employed not to relay information destined to inform or convince, but it is rather their own tacit

participation in a strictly organized system of representation ultimately intended to manipulate the viewing public that is exposed. She analyses the mechanisms at work within these spaces of production of knowledge, exposing how the news media functions as a dramatized representation of reality. "By staging an exaggerated choreography of images, the viewer's attention is drawn to the systems of representation evoked by 'performing' the news."³

* * *

Lynne Marsh accords particular attention to the spaces in which the works are received. *Stadium* is projected onto a free-standing screen and shown in a cinema-like setting complete with old wooden chairs; *Ballroom* is a large-scale projection on the wall; and for *Camera Opera*, Marsh has simulated the TV studio by mounting the two flat-screen monitors on tripods. This attention to presentation reinforces Marsh's conception of architecture as both setting and protagonist, and highlights the fundamental relationship between form and content in the viewing experience.

While the dance hall, the sports stadium and the TV studio are sites of mass cultural expression, built specifically for mass consumption, Marsh represents the group only through a phantom or a surrogate presence or through absence itself—the sound of voices in *Ballroom*, the rows of empty seats in *Stadium* and *Camera Opera*. It is of course significant that it is a single *female* figure whose strong presence animates the space. This is not a figure offered for passive identification, or fetishist consumption. She is not objectified, but rather presents herself as the spectacle, for it is she who controls the experience of the space, or "revolts against the oppressive functionality of the architectural surroundings."⁴ For Marsh, the female body is a figure of empowerment, a means of exposing the alienation inherent in the power

3. Lynne Marsh, from the synopsis of a 57-second version of *Camera Opera* commissioned by the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal and Télé-Québec, and aired during the summer of 2008.

4. Kathrin Becker, "Critical Tourism: On Lynne Marsh's Video Installation *Stadium—first cut*," *Be Magazine*, no. 14 (published by Künstlerhaus Bethanien, 2007), 46.

structures represented. And while she may be a potential object of desire (in *Ballroom*), an almost genderless pseudo-athlete (in *Stadium*), or a characterless anchorwoman (in *Camera Opera*), her role is essentially to deny or reverse the established order. Through the female figure, Marsh exposes the way the architecture participates in the creation of meaning, how their hierarchical structuring reflects the systems of control and power. The figure becomes a vehicle of Brechtian distancing, responsible for transforming the viewer into "an active participant in the production of meanings across an event which was recognized as representation but also as referring to and shaping understanding of contemporary social reality."⁵

Marsh's recurring strategies of conflating the lens of the camera and the eye of the spectator, her means of activating architectural space through the use of repetitive gestures—which render the figure abstract and *virtually* obsolete—the evocation of presence through absence, the uncanny blurring of real and virtual space, all combine to effectively position the viewer as active participant in the production of meaning.

5. Griselda Pollock, "Screening the Seventies: Sexuality and Representation in Feminist Practice—A Brechtian Perspective," *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art* (London: Routledge, 1988), 163.