

Artist Lynne Marsh

"We may not be able to liberate ourselves from the male gaze, instead, let's work with it constructively."



Lynne Marsh "Ninfa Atlas", 2021, Filmstill, Courtesy Lynne Marsh

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Artist Lynne Marsh examines the mechanics of media productions and the hierarchies that underpin them. A conversation about alienation in the digital age and Aby Warburg's Western white male gaze.

Lynne Marsh questions the hierarchies inherent to media production. With video installations that lend visibility to what usually takes place behind the scenes or in a virtual black box, the Canadian artist focuses our attention: on the power of the media's perfectly orchestrated machinery and the technologies it deploys. While working in the German capital, Marsh realized a project with the Berlin Philharmonic, highlighting the labor of its camera crew. Another of her productions was shot at the studio of the N-TV television station, where she staged a news broadcast as an operatic performance.

Both projects can currently be seen as part of a solo exhibition in Riverside, California, focusing on the artist's new work *Ninfa Atlas* that refers to Aby Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas*. A conversation about the figure of the classical nymph and the gestures germane to contemporary protest movements, about epic theater and the promise of technology for high-tech Hollywood.

AS Lynne Marsh, I did not see your new video installation *Ninfa Atlas* in person at the exhibition space, instead I viewed it as an arrangement of virtual windows on my computer screen. Over the course of the pandemic, we got more and more used to this type of viewing. I was wondering how you—as someone who has long worked at the intersection of offline reality and its mediated, staged reproduction—experience this increasing shift of cultural life into virtual spaces.

LM The fact that the project coincided with this pandemic-related development was an interesting coincidence. My earlier work tended to focus on more traditional media. There, the intersections that you mention—that is, the interstices where mediation takes place—are still physical studios with real sets, equipment, and camera operators. With *Ninfa Atlas* I wanted to move the work into a more virtual realm. But not exclusively. I had planned to work with performers, and the rehearsals and workshops were about to start when the first lockdown came. At first, I thought I'd just wait until it's over. As we now know, that wouldn't have been a good plan...

AS To what extent did you have to adapt your ideas to those limitations?

LM Fortunately, I took a speculative approach to the work from the start. Motivated by my move from Europe to California, I really wanted to do something about representation—with actors, new technologies, special effects—the whole apparatus of the Hollywood entertainment industry. The starting point for my work often comes from thinking about a specific location.

AS The *Philharmonie Project* and *Camera Opera*, two older works that are part of the current exhibition, were produced in Berlin, correct?

LM Exactly, that was after my residency at Künstlerhaus Bethanien. *Tragedy*, a film which can also be seen as part of the current exhibition, was shot in England. When I left Europe at the end of 2016 to accept a teaching position at UC Riverside, I began to grapple with my new home base and its relationship to spectacle...

AS Hollywood's dream factories produce all sorts of utopian non-places. Interestingly, the video loops of your work *Ninfa Atlas* are difficult to situate. Instead of following the logic of a conventional image structure, the compositions seem exploded, dimensions are shifted, there seem to be multiple vanishing points. The camera circles around the figures, but sometimes also seems to ignore them. One recognizes a studio architecture, yet other mis-en-scènes turn out to be painted sets, as in: flat picture planes.

LM As in my other works, the aim is to reveal the mechanisms of cultural production. It is a topic I keep coming back to. I understand this perfectly orchestrated machinery as a kind of choreography that I want to intervene in. The technology I use in *Ninfa Atlas* is called volumetric capture. It's a new virtual form of filmmaking which is hoped to revolutionize the industry. A performer is filmed by at least 106 synchronized cameras in a green screen studio from dozens of angles, permitting the virtual generation of all sorts camera perspectives on demand in postproduction. This is how you get rid of the need for a location and make yourself site independent.

AS Which, due to the pandemic, is something you also had to do in the process of producing this work. How did the lack of a physical space for encounter and collaboration affect the project?

LM When I was confronted with the fact of not being able to work physically with the performers, we began to have exchanges via Zoom. They all rehearsed remotely, filming themselves as they improvised.

They then sent me the footage, I edited it and returned it to them so they could translate it back into their own movements. We went back and forth like that in tight feedback loops via digital platforms. This way of connecting, combined with a feeling of isolation is manifest in the work, in these very idiosyncratic performances. Eventually, everyone had to come to the physical studio to have their image captured and transformed into a 3D asset. But essentially, virtual space became our studio. I was then able to load each asset into my computer and to view it in any way I wanted with a virtual camera. Originally, I wanted to somehow place the resulting characters in the real world, but I ended up simulating the studio where we were filming and incorporating the performers into this digital twin of the capture studio. So the final form of the work was very much influenced by the reality of the pandemic, with all its restrictions regarding social contacts.

AS The technology seems related to motion capture and yet it works very differently...

LM That was an important point for me: With motion capture, real actors are fitted with sensors to record their body movements. The resulting 3D assets are more like puppets: they have a skeleton, you can move them on the computer, give them textures, change their appearance. Volumetric capture is not that flexible, the motion sequences are fixed. This really is video, combined with photogrammetry. Characters will only do what they did on stage, flexibility is limited to context and point of view. Which brings us to the figure of the nymph, or rather, to Aby Warburg's idea of her as a kind of liminal being caught between motion and permanence.

AS The document that functioned as a score and that you sent to the cast of *Ninfa Atlas* shows a selection of nymphs from Warburg's famous *Mnemosyne Atlas* against a green screen background. Warburg was enthusiastic about the motif of the nymph because it lent dynamics and drama to the otherwise rather stiff historical images...

LM I was also interested in this tension. And I was interested in Warburg's idea of the "pathos formula" as a recurring motif. This is the reason why the loops in the installation are quite short and repeat certain movements endlessly. With his atlas, Aby Warburg wanted to show how images and certain gestures migrate, both across time and media.

AS The current exhibition's press release states that at its core, the project is based on a translation process that "carries the human figure from the historic archive through embodied performance to digital asset." What is gained in such a translation?

LM A differentiation of motives, looking, for example, at current discourses on gender, identification, and fluidity. When I first started working with the images from Warburg's archive, some of them struck me as rather disturbing and unsettling. The male gaze is omnipresent in those pictures, especially in depictions of the female. It's also a very westernized look. We cannot free ourselves from such perspectives because history cannot be undone. But we should work with it constructively, realizing that we are part of this history and have a stake in it. This also includes dismantling old ways of thinking and to reconstruct things. As part of this translation process, the performers had to rework the original motifs with their bodies and movements, and to then manifest them as media. In so doing, they expand Warburg's atlas and complicate its topoi to include more diverse modes of representation.

AS Aby Warburg defined the "pathos formulas" contained in the atlas as gestures of universal validity. To what extent are the poses and gestures of the "new media nymphs" in *Ninfa Atlas* universal, formulaic—or perhaps also symptomatic of our time?

LM The development of the performances for the project coincided with the Black Lives Matter protests. That had a huge impact on the work. There are gestures of fighting and defending, punching and thrusting movements, most notably with Abriel and Gustine who can be seen on the screens at the periphery of the installation. Both engaged with images of crowds that were omnipresent at the time, with the anger that was prevalent. Ryan, in a toga, moves much more softly, almost flowingly; he was more interested in the

concept of fluidity. Cecilia, dressed in red, has a movement practice that is influenced by diasporic dances, which is evident in her work. The movements of Jobel, in a tracksuit, are quite baroque. All five have chosen moods, postures, attitudes to face the world at this moment of isolation, turmoil, the pandemic, and growing uncertainty. All of that had to enter into the performances in some way, otherwise it wouldn't have worked at all.

AS An interesting moment when I was watching *Ninfa Atlas* on my screen at home was when suddenly a real couple walked past behind the installation. The brief irritation reminded me of Paul Virilio's notion of stereo-reality. This goes back to what I said at the beginning, that we are constantly switching back and forth between the real and the virtual world, sometimes no longer knowing where we actually belong and having the feeling of being everywhere and nowhere at once. The splitting of reality in Virilio's sense or Baudrillard's hyperreality—in which the world becomes superfluous—are these ideas that interest you?

LM Yes, and I wonder how it will be for future generations. My heroes and heroines aren't avatars, I'm not glued to the screen. But I have a six-year-old son who would like to be. There are people, especially younger ones, who move almost exclusively in virtual spaces—not only in times of the pandemic. I'm not afraid to lose my own grip on reality, but I do think about this dynamic as a broader societal and cultural issue. And I think about our current affinity for simulation: where that might lead us. These are definitely questions that I raise in my work. Did you notice the wallpaper in the exhibition that is part of the *Ninfa Atlas* installation?

AS What is its role?

LM It pictures the performers' bodies, flattened and quite radically fragmented. The volumetric video material I recorded is made up of two components; a 3D geometric mesh, and these two-dimensional image maps that wrap around it like a skin. Coincidentally, they are referred to as atlases! From these image maps I created the wallpaper's pattern, which is quite grotesque—as is the technology itself. What it does to the body is really brutal. The simulation, on the other hand, is meant to be as smooth and flawless as possible. I try to break through its quest for perfection by picking out this violent gesture that is part of the manufacturing process, making it visible. I don't know why we keep trying to replicate the world as a hyperreality, but I find the endeavor fascinating. I mean, the idea behind the technology that I used for this new work is to achieve the most lifelike 3D capture of a person possible. Of course, there is an economic factor, but that aside: Why do we keep developing simulations that are as lifelike as possible when we have real life?

AS In the structuralist sense, a simulacrum reconstructs its object through selection and recombination—not in order to copy it, but to make it visible. In addition to the technical aspects of cultural production, you want to reveal the socio-economic aspects in particular—all the invisible labor, all the invisible workers. To achieve this, you deploy a strategy of alienation—using glitches, picture-in-picture effects, shifted perspectives—that is reminiscent of epic theater. The title of your current exhibition, *Who Raised It Up So Many Times*, even quotes Brecht...

LM Kimberli Meyer, the curator, chose the title. It fits the project extremely well. Not only with regard to my latest project, but also in view of the other works in the exhibition. *Camera Opera* is the best example of this classic Brechtian approach. But for me it's also fundamentally about activating the audience, which should never give in completely to the illusion. Images are still consumed, but visual disruptors make you more involved as a spectator, and you become aware of your own role and accountability. This is very important to me: I want to draw attention to our involvement, our agency, when it comes to media consumption. I also think a lot about the virtuosity of the cultural producer, whether it's an actor, a technician, a presenter, or a camera person. I try to undo the hierarchies that exist between people in front of the camera and those behind the camera. I want to celebrate cultural workers in all their roles and with all their different facets.

AS In his poem *Questions From a Worker Who Reads*, from which you borrowed the exhibition's title *Who Raised It Up So Many Times*, Brecht refers to the rebuilding of Babylon. From today's point of view and in the context of your exhibition, the title could also refer to the construction of one's own social media image, the idea of a persona that can be newly constructed over and over. However, looking at platform economies and influencers as a new breed of cultural producers, it becomes clear that the supposedly constructive, creative act often goes hand in hand with destructive forms of exploitation...

LM Absolutely. I think there are some interesting aspects to this idea. On the one hand there is identity, on the other hand there is identification, these can be very different things. Of course, likes, followers, and algorithms are increasingly at play. I think there is still the possibility for such creative construction, yet at the same time there is an increasing danger of alienation. Also looking at this moment of growing social awareness that we talked about earlier: We're starting to recognize underrepresented voices, which is critical. But I also try to remind my students that we must not fall into this neoliberal attitude of individualism, as in: I matter, my voice must be heard. It is no coincidence that in the United States more and more trade unions are dissolving, that collectivity is breaking up in many places. On the other hand, I see dynamics headed into the opposite direction, as in concepts of "commoning" or initiatives trying to return unions to a grassroots level. I think we need to strengthen our sense of community rather than our individual selves. Because only in large numbers can we move things along, change, and build something.

AS I would like to use this line of thought to take us back to the topic of staging in media productions. The idea of using it to move the masses also raises negative connotations. I understand that you realized a project looking at the Olympic stadium in Berlin, which was built for the 1936 Olympics, and another one at Kunsthaus Dahlem, the former studio of Arno Breker, an architect and sculptor who was a favorite of Adolf Hitler. Was it also an interest in how National Socialists used the media that motivated you to stay in Berlin after your year at Künstlerhaus Bethanien?

LM What made me stay after this one-year residency was above all this sense of an unresolved, tangible kind of history. The question of what to do with the past, how to deal with its sites and monuments. Breker's studio lay idle for a long time before it became Kunsthaus Dahlem. The work I did there is called *Taking Positions* and there are parallels to *Ninfa Atlas*. I had different women adopt the poses of Breker's sculptures to explore the extent to which certain poses can be repositories of ideology. There, too, it was about the idea of working with history, about the question of how to constructively intervene in its lacunae. Which brings us back to the motif of the threshold, of the in-between that interests me so much: During my time in Berlin, I felt all these different kinds of states of limbo, also with regard to time—there was this slow, hesitant way of dealing with space and architecture. History felt palpable and so much seemed possible. I was in Berlin from 2006 to 2014, which was a really productive phase for me and also an opportunity to get closer to my personal history: I was adopted, and my birth mother was German. I dug up these old documents and obtained my German citizenship while there.

AS When are you coming back?

LM As soon as possible! I was so hoping to see the *Mnemosyne Atlas* exhibition at Haus der Kulturen der Welt in 2020, but then the pandemic hit. I also have a lot of friends in town and I hope it will be easier to visit them soon.

Canadian artist Lynne Marsh lives and works in Los Angeles. In her work, she addresses image production and the mechanisms and agency inherent to mass media and new technologies. Her works can be found in, among others, the collections of the Akademie der Künste, Berlin; the Berlinische Galerie; the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa; and the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec, Montréal.

***Who Raised It Up So Many Times?*, Culver Art Center, Riverside, through January 9, 2022.**