

## **DIMANCHE ROUGE: FOCUS ON NORWAY**

### **Norwegian Performances at Le Générateur**

*By Agnieszka Gracza*

“Performance art is experience – shared time and space and actions between people,” as Marilyn Arsem puts it in her laconic 2011 *THIS Is Performance Art* manifesto read out in its entirety by artist Agnes Nedregard in the course of a performative lecture at the Cité Internationale’s Maison de Norvège – appropriately for an event conceived as part of the *Focus on Norway* series, hosted by Dimanche Rouge at various venues in Paris. Curated by Nedregard and fellow Performance Art Bergen (PAB)-member Rita Marhaug, this carefully thought-out programme of events – spread over a week or so – culminated in five solo performances by as many Bergen- and Oslo-based artists on March 23rd. The show took over Le Générateur in Gentilly, a former movie theatre located on the outskirts of Paris, which prides itself on being the only place dedicated to showcasing visual art performance in the French capital.

Documented on video and in stills, the five consecutive pieces lasted between ten minutes and half an hour. By turns provocative, poetic, sensual and comic, each performance and performance artist – Rita Marhaug, Agnes Nedregard, Franzisca Siegrist, Anja Carr, and Kiyoshi Yamamoto (in order of appearance) – had its own way of claiming the audience’s attention and inhabiting Le Générateur’s cavernous, uncluttered space: a blank canvas for the artists to people with actions. Overlapping formal, material as well as thematic concerns, beside the common catch-all theme of “Civilization and Human Nature”, point to a shared sensibility and working process.

#### **TEXTILE**

Traditionally the preserve of women (though by no means in all cultures), textile, the use of fabrics, materials or – in the case of Siegrist – thread, connects the practice of all five artists. Before she went on to complete an MFA at the Glasgow School of Art, Nedregard specialized in Textile art for her BA at the Bergen Academy of Art and Design, which is also where both Marhaug and Japanese-Brazilian artist Yamamoto did their MAs. Based in Bergen and part of the PAB collective, the latter considers textile to be his main artistic material, though he works in a variety of media. Carr also makes herself the plush toy animal costumes that she uses in her performances.

Textiles, wallpapers and furniture items matching the artist’s fair skin colour frequently crop up in Marhaug’s performative and object-based work. *Second Skin* (2014) saw a see-through light tan sheet of sizeable proportions (15 x 10 metres) draped over the plain yellow brick façade of Point B Worklodge in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. A variation on the theme, *Skin Deep* at Le Générateur began with the still image of a vast expanse of flesh-coloured fabric loosely spread out on the polished concrete floor. Bulging dune-like at one end, beneath which the artist lay on her side in the spot light, the sheet conjured up a desert landscape, one which started shifting, causing the creases on its surface to deepen and form a wavy pattern, as the figure buried within its folds proceeded to slowly gather them round her at the outset of the performance.

Shimmering fabrics mounted on wooden poles as flags that members of the audience were invited to pick up and wave around to samba rhythms brought the *Focus on Norway* event to a festive close with Yamamoto’s uplifting *Let’s Get Colorblind*. In

contrast with Marhaug's fleshy palette, as if drained of colour, the flags came in a range of vibrant hues – from dusky blue to fiery orange shot through with golden yellow – that together spanned the colours of the rainbow. Conceived as a manifesto in the shape of a dyed cotton canvas, Yamamoto's *Arco (Iris): Unweaving the Rainbow. Calling Anni Albers* (2012) styles itself as a conversation with Anni Albers, the German-American textile artist and printmaker, who was married to Bauhaus artist and influential colour theorist Josef Albers.

## BLINDNESS

*Vertigo of the Mind* (2013) – first shown at the 12th Turbine Giswil International Performance Art festival in Giswil, Switzerland – begins with Nordregard crouching, her hands placed over her eyes in a bid to focus the audience's attention on the piece and draw them into its sphere. This enigmatic gesture could be construed as a way of making room for the "lower" senses traditionally put below that of vision, and above all touch, on which a great deal of emphasis is placed in this interactive piece staging a series of intimate encounters, whose physical (and tactile) nature occasionally lends them an erotic character. And yet, far from dismissing vision, the artist challenges individual audience members to meet her gaze – a further way of testing boundaries and pushing back the limits of what is normally allowed in our interactions with strangers.

In a public art piece titled *Blind Artist* (2013), Marhaug tentatively moved around the Giardini and the Arsenale area during the preview of the Venice Biennale, sporting a white outfit and white lenses which effectively blocked her vision. Staged as part of *Infr'Action Venezia II*, the durational performance was intended as a subtle comment on the rampantly ambitious artists who flock to the Biennale preview. Made for the occasion, the powerful image of the "blind artist" has since been repurposed in other contexts, among other in *Skin Deep*. Instead of the white clothes, the artist had a frilly cream-coloured dress on that she eventually discarded along with her matching heels. Wearing nothing but a beige body suit, she cautiously advanced towards the audience with her arms outstretched to gain equilibrium, revealing her frightening blank gaze as she moved her head from side to side, before exiting the room.

Sun shades, rather than contact lenses, designed to induce colour blindness, as opposed to actual blindness, and meant to be worn by spectators, not only the artist, made for the playful character of Yamamoto's *Let's Get Colorblind*. Laid out on a table in neat rows, the glasses had rims in four different colours – red, blue, green, orange – corresponding to four among the most common types of colour blindness: protanopia, protanomaly, deuteranomaly, and tritanopia. Depending on the chosen glasses, one momentarily lost the ability to distinguish between, say, red and green (deuteranomaly), or blue and yellow (tritanopia). The flags became a testing ground to determine exactly which type of colour blindness one had.

But for Yamamoto it would be more correct to speak of "colour deficiency", rather than of "colour blindness". The artist takes a quasi-militant stance on this issue, considering "colorblindness" – as he puts it – to be "an outsider minority". No one has ever made artworks with people who are colour blind in mind (getting on for 10 per cent of the male population in Norway); Yamamoto intends to remedy the situation.

## ANIMAL NATURE

With the exception of Yamamoto, who said a few words to kick the party off that ended with the playful injunction to “get colourblind”, the artists in the *Focus on Norway* series by and large tended to privilege non-verbal modes of communication. Carr took this to an extreme, refusing to speak even at the round table discussion, which took place at the Plateforme Gallery three days prior to the performances staged at Le Générateur. Dressed in one of her signature bright coloured animal outfits, she sat through the hour-and-a-half-long event loudly munching on carrots and occasionally throwing some at a life-size puppet plush horse placed in our midst. Food often features in Carr’s colourful performances and installations, and *Horseplay* shown at Le Générateur was no exception; it involved copious amounts of ketchup and a string of (real) sausages that the artist, who is a vegetarian, did not consume herself but used to force feed a (toy) horse.

The longest of the five performances, lasting a little over 30 minutes, Carr’s *Horseplay* vaguely recalled the beginning of Marhaug’s *Skin deep*. In both pieces the performer initially appeared as a hump bulging the fabric that hid her body from view even while suggesting its form. Marhaug’s skin-coloured shroud extended from the wall to a cube covered with a piece of tawny fur that fell round it in graceful folds. Carr was concealed within the “belly” or the middle part of a dappled white plush material, shaped to look like a toy (albeit life-size) horse with a reddish mane, blue eyes fringed by long eye-lashes, two legs ending in hoofs, two red slits marking the horse’s mouth and the ass out of which the performer emerged wearing a horse head mask that she then took off.

When she eventually disclosed herself to the audience, Marhaug herself was wearing a head cover, resembling a fencing mask, and made of the same tawny fur as the one laid over the cube. *Crepuscular* (2013), a duo made in collaboration with Benedicte Clementsen, had both performers wear heavy mink coats in sweltering heat. For Marhaug, fur connotes danger, animality as well as femininity, owing to its touch-inviting softness. All those elements were at play in *Skin deep*, which saw the artist cautiously advance on all fours, occasionally crouching, until she reached the cube and rested her masked furry head on it. Upright posture, the ability to stand up, is what marks out humans from other animal species. It was only once she stood on the cube that Marhaug cast off, one by one, sundry items of clothing she wore. Her mask came off at the very last, but not before the artist breathed heavily and audibly into it, filling it with air like a balloon.

#### DREAMS AND NIGHTMARES

With limited means, each of the five performances succeeded in creating its own distinctive mood and atmosphere by means of costumes, props, lighting. Each had a dream-like logic all its own, privileging certain senses, deploying its own vocabulary of ritualistic gestures, distorting perception to suit its own artistic needs. “For Art to be Reality,” wrote the anthropologist Margaret Mead in *Art and Reality: From the Standpoint of Cultural Anthropology* (1943), “the whole sensuous being must be caught up in the experience.”

The cup embodies refinement and civilization, but for Siegrist it is an object of everyday use: we drink coffee from a cup to keep us awake, just as we drink tea from it to make us fall asleep. The number of cups in *31 Cups*, initially strung together with thread, corresponded to the days of the months. In Siegrist’s poetic universe, the cup

became a container of dreams, symbolically represented by white feathers and black beans that the artist would shake out of her capacious black leather boots, aiming for the white porcelain cups she had previously lined up. Calling to mind magic rituals, the white feathers that softly fell to the ground stood for dreams, whereas the black beans, which made the porcelain ring as they hit the bottom of the cup, embodied nightmares.

At the start of the performance, the artist walked up to the audience holding in her hands a single white cup on a saucer, which she placed on the ground. Instead of drink, the cup contained thin strips of typewritten paper fanning out round its edges. Having scattered some beans and feathers on to it during the performance, the artist brought things to an elegant close by brushing these aside and drinking the contents of the cup in one draught. The final image the spectators were left with was that of the paper strips protruding from the artist's mouth, not unlike the golden rays sometimes bearing words in early Renaissance Annunciation scenes. One of the strips scattered on the ground read "there weaker than a new-born lamb. In his dreams he" on one side and "the drugged meal in the inn two nights ago and he had" on the other.

The duality of dreams and nightmares likewise underpinned Carr's *Horseplay*, inspired by the power dynamics between her childhood heroine Pippi Longstocking and her uncooperative horse, familiar to readers of Swedish author Astrid Lindgren's stories. In contrast to the other performances, the dim-lit room plunged the audience straightaway into Carr's nocturnal, eroticized version of childhood with its sadistic overtones. Carr's blandishments and patting as she endeavoured to ride the "horse" (an attempt doomed from the start) were soon followed by rougher treatment as the toy horse costume stretched out on the ground refused to budge. Yet the absurdity of the action, the futile nature of the whole endeavour, did not detract from its poetry. From start to finish, Carr abided by the dream logic of the piece, which made no distinction between two- and three-dimensional reality.

Agnieszka Gracza, July 2014