

STIRRING, SPINNING, SWEEPING A PERFORMANCE BY MARYLIN ARSEM

MOBIUS, 354 Congress St., Boston

Try to rub a piece of rough lamb's wool in your hand. After a moment, your palm and your fingers will be as smooth as velvet and they will smell slightly of paraffin. Try to *spin* a piece of rough lamb's wool and, after a while, a formless and fuzzy tuft will become a strong string.

During her one-and-half-hour-long performance at Mobius, Marylin Arsem allowed onlookers to touch, smell, spin, look and hear. While activating all human senses, Arsem led spectators into a magical realm of histories, memories, fairy-tails, myths and fantasies about wool, without defining a border between reality and fiction.

Keep spinning, and imagine how many days, months and years would it take to spin enough string to weave and dye fabric for all the dresses, towels, blankets, bedspreads and tablecloths you use. Spinning from the first

to the last minute of her performance, Marylin Arsem—surrounded by stirring spoons, spinning wheels, vessels, different kinds of wool, herbs and natural dyes and an old, consistently sweeping woman—excavates deep layers of traditional women's work. Gradually, her semi-didactic introduction into the prehistory and development of the thousands and thousands-of years-old labor is transformed into an adventurous narrative—a labyrinth of meanings, references and psychosomatic experiences. It is not Princess Ariadne who is marking a path through the labyrinth with red thread. Instead, it is the mythical spinning woman, witch, miraculous female healer, Arsem's eternal mother, grandmother and herself. It is not the Minotaur himself who is waiting in the end of the labyrinth, but, instead, it is his shadow as the ever-present echo of death.

Arsem's *Stirring, Spinning, Sweeping* is about time, and, at the same time, it is time itself. All aspects of Arsem's performance, from a brief chronology of spinning, the quiet, calming voice of the performer-narrator and the monotonous sound of the spinning wheel to the change from light to darkness (night is the best time for spinning, as the immortal grandmother convinces us) refer to the passing of time; they measure our lives, make us parts of the history, and turn most of the once-great thoughts, idols and objects into ruins. However joyful the story-telling of Marylin Arsem might be, time is a metaphor for death here. In the performance, a bride spins, weaves, cuts and stitches to create her wedding dress, yet not to get married, but to kill. Here, woman becomes Mother of Time (a title of Arsem's performance of 1994) and, as the main character of Arsem's performance, questions the validity of the stereotypical dichotomy between masculine and feminine as that between time and space.

Women's work such as sewing, knitting, patch-work, embroidery or lace-making have become a focus of the feminist re-reading of art history and the hierarchy of "high" art (male) and crafts (female—decorative, low, applied, domestic art). Marylin Arsem devotes her performance to women's heritage (there is, in fact only one man in her piece, and he dies anyway) but, unlike a lot of essentialist feminists, she represents the feminine in a multifaceted manner. Arsem's woman is a being who ambiguously includes the all-mighty power of both deity (woman as God) and evil (woman as Sorceress); however, a definition of good and bad as well as of truth and lie remains open. Instead of appropriating the ready-to-consume images and narratives of women, there is a careful and detailed research in the history of women's work behind Arsem's performance. In her natural and accessible human

expression, Marylin Arsem creates a spinning woman not as an ideological construct but as a subject of one's (woman's and man's) imagination and physical experience.

As I was going home in the rainy and cold evening after the performance, I was holding an unpeeled walnut (great for black dye) in a nest of wool in the pocket of my jacket. It felt warm, smooth and sensual, and I had a feeling that I was bringing with me a small part of Woman's memory, a short story about the delicate hands, patience and duty (or wasn't it, after all, a part of my wedding dress?).

Martina Pachmanová



Marylin Arsem, *Stirring, Spinning, Sweeping*, performance at MOBIUS, 1996

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