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Stirring, Spinning, Sweeping. Performed by Marilyn Arsem with Virginia Abblitt. Slater Mill Historic Site, Pawtucket, Rhode Island, March, 1995.

While writing this review I dreamed that my family, extended family, and even long-time friends of my extended family had, uninvited, taken the liberty of an overnight visit in Marilyn Arsem's house. While she and her husband were out, my family ran rampant, bouncing on the bed, mussing up the covers. Anyone writing about someone else's performance might feel like such an invasive house guest, but Arsem's work particularly inspires this feeling: it is an edifice rooted in her sense of place and filled with her family, living and dead. I enter the work with my own history and associations, entwining my life with her art in a most intimate way.

Stirring, Spinning, Sweeping is the first of a series of performances entitled *Spinning Tales*, which examines the nature and associations of traditional women's work in Europe and New England. Arsem came of age as an artist in the late '70s, when she founded what is now the Mobius Artists Group in Boston. For a long time her work focused on themes of mythology. This led her to folklore, history, and finally family history—a concern that flows into the current artistic compulsion to grapple tangibly with our particular (multiple) lineages, the accretions of our ancestors' histories. In this work Arsem is actively locating herself, wrapping herself around, weaving, embedding herself in traditional women's work and it into her. What's more, she roots herself into the sandy New England landscape, telling stories about her grandmother, who quickly multiplies into many grandmothers—increasingly uncanny, twisty stories that remind me of the Hawthorne I read as a schoolgirl on Cape Cod. She is remembering, and so revivifying, the forgotten women whose traces live inside our bodies.

In the first part of the performance, Arsem stresses the arduousness and monotony of the relentless repetition of "women's work." In the

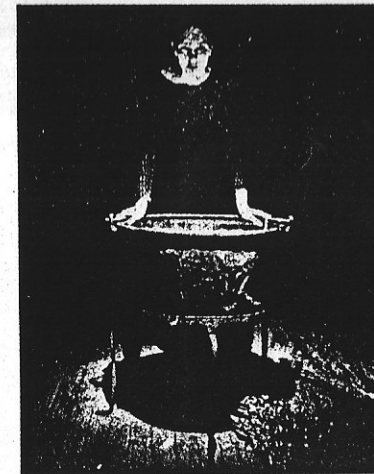


PHOTO: BOB RAYMOND

Marilyn Arsem performs *Stirring, Spinning, Sweeping*.

second she emphasizes the transcendent magic that may arise from this monotony, as trance-like or meditative states emerge from repetition. The turning point of the performance, the pivot at which we spin from toil to transport, is marked by the story Arsem tells here. She speaks of looking at family photographs and finding a picture of herself with her two sisters and photos of her mother with her two sisters, of her three female cousins, of her grandmother and her two sisters. Noticing that she came from a long line of trios of female siblings, she had a flash that all the photos, all the trios of women and girls, overlapped, existed at the same time. And this is the heart of the piece: all stories exist simultaneously in a mythic space.

One of the most masterful elements of this work is the way the audience is drawn from the linear, quotidian time scale of the everyday into the cyclical time of moonlight and firelight. Entering the brightly lit performance space, we find seats around a stage space filled with big piles of wool, two spinning wheels, a large kettle, some chestnuts, dyes. Bunches of dried herbs and flowers hang from the ceiling; I recognized sumac. Arsem circulates among the audience, handing out little hunks of wool, telling us about what kind of sheep it came from and where, and what its qualities are. In the center of the performance space, a white-haired woman [Virginia Abblitt] is sweeping a compact mound of flour into a small circle with an old-fashioned broom. Arsem launches into an exposition of the history of spinning among Europeans in New

England. Her narrative is very much in keeping with the site, an old cotton mill-turned-museum, and with the museum tour that preceded the performance. She shows us how to spin our own pieces of wool into yarn and tells us that spinning has been women's work in almost every culture in which it has existed, probably because it took so much time but could be easily interrupted to attend to children. As we in the audience settle into spinning, Arsem describes how very long it took—a woman's entire childhood and adolescence—to spin and weave and sew a dowry. She shows us an early spinning wheel and tells us that a woman, spinning late before the fire, could walk twenty miles in a day, back and forth, pulling the thread out and then winding it back around the bobbin. In some houses you can see a groove worn into the floor before the fireplace where the spinning wheel used to be.

She tells us about a bog in Denmark where bodies have been preserved intact for thousands of years. In the late 19th century a woman was found with her woven wool dress and bonnet preserved intact, the garments still arranged with great care. She had apparently been executed: there were forked sticks holding her under the water and a perfectly preserved look of fear on her face. The bones of a baby were found underneath her. Clearly, she had transgressed (again I'm reminded of Hawthorne). This is the first of a series of curves Arsem throws us, and it sets up an association between spinning and witchcraft that is central to the piece.

Arsem then begins a series of family histories—her own, we presume. There are a lot of stories about her grandmother. I start to wonder how her grandmothers could have been alive in 1601 and lived in so many New England towns, under so many circumstances. And then the stories become more bizarre, and I recognize a fairy tale I've heard, and I realize we have left the museum tour and even the autobiography and launched into the realm of the mythic. Arsem sits in the back of the space, deft fingers spinning flax, and tells stories of witchcraft as the lights grow dim. A floor-level lamp throws a large shadow of the constantly spinning wheel against the back wall, first one then two then three consecutively larger wheels, images of circular time. The sweeper sweeps the flour, beautifully, meticulously, in ever-widening circles, "unraveling time." I don't want her to stop because when the flour is dispersed the stories will be over, the wheels will stop spinning, the thread will be cut, and we'll be yanked back into linear time. Breath, suspended, will resume and so eventually cease.

Like all rich work, *Stirring, Spinning, Sweeping* evokes many layers of associations; this is where I start invading the house and bouncing on the beds. The most tenacious image is that of accumulated history—the

history of our ancestors accumulated in our bodies, the groove of that daily twenty-mile walk in our muscles, my grandmother's labor evident in my own stooped shoulders. It is this seductive power of history that is behind the impulse to wear my recently dead grandmother's clothes, wearing them like the woven cloak Arsem describes, worn for three generations, outliving its maker, sheltering and warming her daughter and granddaughter long after she is dead. It's a need for rootedness, continuity, accretion. It's the desire to be sheltered by our mothers, to be embraced by those woven extensions of their bodies.

The inverse of this desire is the equally strong desire to make myself into the world. Recalling the performance I feel a hungry impulse in my chest and arms and fingers, slyly instilled by Arsem's invitation to spin, the itch to be making. And yet, watching Arsem's hands at the spinning wheel, threading it through intricate loops according to some very specific recipe, I can appreciate how arcane much of "women's work" has seemed to men, with its oral traditions passed down from mother to daughter: recipes, herbal concoctions, spells, secrets of menstruation and childbirth. So the associations between women and witchcraft, between weaving and spinning and terrifying secrets, are vivid and understandable. To create a physical environment that is an extension of the human body—transforming random clumps of wool and cotton into thread and then into clothing, sheets, and drapes—is a kind of magic in itself. The itch I feel in my arms is the itch to leave a tangible trace of myself, like a crustacean excreting its shell.

—Rebecca Todd