

Marilyn Arsem

“Through the Ether/ Durch Den Aether”

Städtische Galerie Dreieich, Germany

31<sup>st</sup> of August – 30<sup>th</sup> September 2001

The OED describes the word ‘ether’ thus: “the medium filling the upper regions of space, as the elements *breathed by the gods*” (italics mine). Thus, ‘ether’ can be understood as a liminal space, one that constitutes through distinction. The liminal functions (actually, imaginatively) to divide space and offer up, instead, place: one place, or site, or body, divided from another. It distinguishes a human being standing on this planet from the sublimity of the heavens, and threatens, through being that which stands for a metaphysical difference, a distance. A liminal space is a border-zone that, by its very existence points to this distance. While setting up the phantasy of an originary unity as missing, it opens a space for the desire for originary unity to be articulated. In this way the liminal can be understood as the site of the unimaginable, therefore *unrepresentable*—that which lies at the edges of meaning or in the space where meaning collapses. Here ‘ether’ functions imaginatively, at the edge of intelligibility: as the threshold between the space one is physically grounded in, and the possibility of a transcendental ‘Other’ – in the case of the OED referent, ‘the gods.’

Whether considering the threat imbedded within the boundary between one (sexualized) body and another, (*Naked*- [www.wgbh.org/wgbh/pages/bostonarts/2000/highlights\\_arsem.html](http://www.wgbh.org/wgbh/pages/bostonarts/2000/highlights_arsem.html)) or playing along the edges of intelligibility in her 2001 outdoor installation “Messages from Beyond” (performed for the Convergence 2001 International Arts Festival), Marilyn Arsem's performance work offers heterogeneous notions of both physical and psychical space. Neither the physical nor the psychical is offered to us as self evidently transparent or self-equivalent distinctions. Employing these ideas Arsem regularly interrogates questions of ‘place’ (as in, for example, *Recent: Remote* (commissioned by CoCA as part of their Land/Use/Action series) by problematizing ‘history’, pointing to the way histories, the production of knowledges about a place or a people, mediate how one can come to know a ‘site’. Teasing out the details of place from which to construct clues which function to resist easy readings of history, Arsem offers us *contingent* structures of intelligibility. As in “Messages from Beyond”, where she incises words into the landscape, leaving her own poetic trace behind in a poignant, intimate, temporally delicate gesture, in *Through the Ether/ Durch Den Aether* Arsem again performs a series of actions which offer an invitation to meditate on a contingent intelligibility by offering what seems to be an impossible gesture. The gesture is impossible because, as is the case with “Messages from Beyond”, in the very method of her intervention the words left behind are destined to be erased, perhaps before a single soul has seen them. What is impossible is for the reception of the communication to be guaranteed. In the ever-quoted model of the post-structural-impossibility-of-definitive-meaning, connections occur across a gap or liminal space that lies between the signifier and signified of discourse, as intertextuality expresses itself in all its impossible glory. Embedded in this structure is the perpetually deferred play of desire. It is here, within an evocative world of desire, perpetually deferred, always impossible, and operating at the level of phantasy, that I would like to situate *Through the Ether/ Durch Den Aether*.

Part of the “Energie Raum” portion of “Energie und Kunst”, held at the Städtische Galerie in Dreieich, the performance “Through the Ether/ Durch Den Aether” was centralized around a

computer monitor located inside the gallery space. Arsem engaged directly with the gallery visitors/participants, asking them to write on a slip of paper a question they might want answered and then placing the questions all into one large bowl. Engaging indirectly were the other performers: Paul Couillard in Canada, Walter G. Brand, Nancy Osborn, and Cly Boehs in the USA, Craig Quintero in Taiwan, and Teresa Vasconcelos in Portugal. The performance consisted of Arsem pulling out, over one hour, in 10 minute intervals, a series of questions, chosen to be sent by the participants in the gallery space to the individual performers in Canada, the US, Taiwan, and Portugal, through the deliciously poetic medium of ‘directed thought’. The timing for the communications were organized to account for the differing times zones in each case, so at a particular moment Paul Couillard in Canada, for example, knew to make himself available for a communication sent from the gallery at 2:30 pm. At the same time in Germany (8:30 pm) the participants in the gallery were given information to focus on in identifying Paul’s location and person, and when Paul sensed that the question had been adequately sent it was his job to respond to whatever question it was that he ‘sensed’ had been sent, but this time the communication was returned to the gallery space via e-mail. The participants could then access the answer to their telepathically offered question on the monitor provided. What interests me most are the implications of this moment as the participants closed their eyes and, based on a limited set of descriptive instructions, attempted to send a question, by sheer force of will, to another human being they had never met, located thousands of miles away. Here we are offered a grotesque elaboration of the impossibility at the heart of all linguistic utterance, yet what is crucial is its recourse to a seemingly pre-linguistic psychical gesture. It is in this movement ‘backward’ from the realm of Language to one of pure psychic connection that we find ourselves imbedded within a phantasy of originary unity—a ‘oneness’ which, after Lacan, is broken in an imaginary moment of simultaneous inauguration into both the linguistic and visual registers of the mirror phase. The dynamics of this constitution are of having been constituted as suddenly “*I was whole*” -- a ‘before’ which then becomes a future, a perpetually deferred point of desire. Constituted through a simultaneously internalized and externalized relationship with the Other (Language, the Spectral Image) the subject is decentered in its very constitution as ‘in relation to’ Other. Within this structure one moves from ‘wholeness’ into the radical alterity that comprises the territory of ‘humanness’. In the inevitability of distance, loss, of separation, of the gap that allows for desire, a wonderful possibility is born. For if the gap were not there, if psychic unity were never shattered (!), if the relationship between the signifier and the signified were not always under the threat of miss-fire, we would lose this delicious possibility of longing and fulfillment, the delight and joy of an attempt, the devotion of a gesture. Within a piece like Through the Ether/ Durch Den Aether Arsem offers us a space which is liminal, as well as abject, but in this case it is a psychic abjection – a transcendently affective excess – that is explored in the seemingly simple offering of a question, and the receiving of an answer.

Natalie Loveless