Carlson/Strom: New Performance Video

DeCordova Museum and Sculpture Park

Performing the American Landscape

Choreographer and performer Ann Carlson and video artist Mary Ellen Strom have been collaborators in art and life since the early 1990s. The artists, under the joint moniker Carlson/Strom, draw on the disciplines of dance and video to create work that merges and expands the boundaries of each field. Dancing lawyers, singing day laborers, a cow in an art gallery, and figures cloaked in buffalo hides populate the five installations featured in **Carlson/Strom: New Performance Video**. Visually eloquent and poignantly humorous, their recent works address current issues of national identity, environmental degradation, and economic disparities set against a backdrop of historic representations of a national landscape. By using time-based forms (performance and video) to "read through" past art, Carlson/Strom create a temporal complex. They compress past, present, and future to critically distill the intertwined trajectories of art, history, the body, and the land.

Thus, the artists reinterpret Frederic Remington's 1908 painting, *Indians Simulating Buffalo*, on the contested hills of the North Cheyenne Reservation in Montana to provide a Native American counter-narrative of the conquest of the "Wild West." Immigrant construction workers double Walter De Maria's large-scale earthwork in the Mojave Desert, *Two Parallel Lines*, 1968, to four temporary lines on the beach. Located in a liminal space of national identity, their video questions who exactly is allowed to leave lasting marks on the land. Joseph Beuys's 1974 performance with a live coyote in a New York gallery that sought to address "Spiritual America," is restaged in a similar white-cube environment with a Holstein American industrial cow and a dancing Carlson. In two other videos, the economic landscape emerges through the rhythmic sounds and gestures pulled from the vernacular of work environments: specifically, a law firm and a construction site.

In their collaborative projects, Carlson/Strom employ quotation and performance to achieve a critical and socially-committed approach to art making in the feminist tradition. Their own co-authoring relationship, in which each artist contributes equally and distinctly (Carlson pulls from her dance background, Strom from her video work), purposefully results in performance video that can be interpreted in myriad ways to complicate the notion of a singular, hegemonic meaning in art. Meanwhile, their engagement with communities, other artists, and even animals, dismantles conventional boundaries between artist and subject.

While doing so, they fuse two artistic traditions that share a historic concern with the moving body. Video emerged as an art medium in the late-1960s and early 1970s, in part, from experimental dance and performances. The body on camera became the primary means for artists to explore the nature of mediated (self) perception and the media's subsequent impact on forming notions of 'self.' As such, video quickly became a tool for pioneering feminist artists to deconstruct objectifying depictions of women in art and in the mass media.[1] Carlson/Strom build on these conceptual and activist traditions and push them even further. It is thus the social, historical, and economic condition of the moving body that concerns them.

They use performance (i.e.; the moving body) to quote the history of art and thereby establish counter-narratives that illuminate gendered and racial blind spots which persist in our cultural memory. As theorist Homi Bhabha notes, understanding a dominant artistic culture as a performative entity—a thing that is not fixed but created—is an interpretive strategy of critical engagement for those who have been historically excluded. It is a means to re-approach cultural traditions from alternative viewpoints to challenge and change those very traditions.[2] Carlson/Strom similarly perform culture with their numerous collaborators—white collar professionals, the working underclass, other artists, and even animals—to appropriate visual traditions in form and content and ultimately question the politics of representation.

Implicit in this strategy of using history is the acknowledgment that our pasts are always with us as active agents in our present lives. By establishing a dialogue with art history in particular, the artists suggest that past images (representations) are equally implicated in forming our cultural landscape and are deeply intertwined with political and economic histories. Similarly, the specific genre of landscape art that Carlson/Strom repeatedly reference carries with it distinctive connotations of power and dominance. Organizing a "wild" landscape into a comprehensive, "aesthetically processed" vista suggests a desire to control nature by visually taming it.[3]

Meadowlark

The themes of dominance and controlling nature are nowhere more explicit than in the multi-channel video, *Meadowlark*, 2008, a partial redressing of Remington's 100-year-old painting *Indians Simulating Buffalo*, 1908, and its implied imperialist ideologies of 18th- and 19th-century western expansion. The painting depicts a pair of Native Americans disguising themselves with buffalo hides as a rudimentary hunting technique. While this was not an authentic or practiced method, the image reinforced and helped naturalize the popular myth of the sneaky and untrustworthy Native American—a myth based in cultural differences in land trades and encapsulated in the pejorative "Indian Giver." In the far background, dusty yellow and blue mountains mimic the figures' hunched forms, as if to correlate their bodies with the landscape. But a narrow caravan of wagons moves westward, in the depths of the middle ground, in between the hunters and the mountain range. This is Remington's thin line of progress—the western expansion cutting through the vast landscape on its way to conquer and civilize the "Wild West." The painting demands that both the land and its native inhabitants be subjugated in the fulfillment of Manifest Destiny.

Although a lifelong East Coaster, Remington was one of the foremost constructors of the idea of the Old West. In addition to his later well-known paintings and sculptures, he produced books, countless short stories, and thousands of illustrations, which were widely published in mass-circulated weeklies like *Colliers* and *Harpers*. Through its sheer ubiquity, Remington's imagery supplied the dominant visual narrative of Anglo-America's conception of the West, complete with its "Cowboy-and-Indian" face-offs. His work became the foundation for Western films of the John Ford and John Wayne era,

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1. Frederic Remington, *Indians Simulating Buffalo*,1908, oil on canvas
2. Still from Ann Carlson, Bently Spang, and Mary Ellen Strom, *Meadowlark*, 2008, six-channel video

and extended its reach into the broader media with such images as the Marlboro Man in the 1980s.[4] But as more recent scholarship has been careful to stress, Remington's imperialist ideology echoed already-popular beliefs in social evolution and the racial dominance of Anglo-Americans over native peoples,[5] a publicly held and sanctioned position in the United States that persisted well into the 20th century.[6] That said, Remington's unparalleled circulation and subtly insidious depiction of Native Americans make his work stand out from his contemporaries' as a complex of meanings and histories.[7]

Carlson/Strom collaborated with Northern Cheyenne artist Bently Spang to literally "challenge normative expectations of development and progress," as Bhabha writes, by restaging the painting on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation in Montana. A preserved area of 445,000 acres, the Reservation is the last bastion of undeveloped land in the region. But it is peppered with dead and dying trees, indicators of an ecosystem thrown out of balance by a century of nearby mining and unconsidered exploitation of natural resources and, more broadly, global warming. Carlson and Spang masquerade as buffalo in the foreground, as the Meadowlark sings, and Strom's camera pans the expansive, scorched landscape. The video installation, presented as a ring of six monitors, echoes 19th- and early 20th-century cycloramas—the immersive, room-sized paintings-in-the-round that recreated for visitors travel experiences or sensational events like the Great Chicago Fire of 1871 or the Galveston flood of 1900. Very much the precursor to modern-day cinemas as public spectacle, the cyclorama was roughly contemporaneous with Remington's painting. Like his work, they brought distant landscapes to urban dwellers.

In its subject matter and format, *Meadowlark* is a critical revision and counter-telling of a historical narrative—the glorification of the Old West—and the visual language through which it was transmitted. By pushing landscape painting through video, so to speak, the artists transform a mute, passive, and therefore objectified subject (the Native American figure in the landscape) into a dynamic scene of agency that gives voice to a suppressed narrative. In doing so, Carlson, Spang, and Strom remind us that the legacy of a work like Remington's painting and the ideology it represents is not confined to history books or museums but has much larger implications in the treatment of the American landscape. The Northern Cheyenne territory, like the nation itself, still bears the ecological scars of western expansion.

Collaboration + The Laboring Body: The Real People Series

The ecological and social relationships between art and physical landscapes become a more tangible issue in later forms of landscape art. Land Art, or Earthworks, emerged as a growing practice in the late-1960s as the environmental movement took root and the boundaries of contemporary art-making were radically tested and expanded. Artists such as Robert Smithson, Michael Heizer, and Walter De Maria produced architecturally-scaled sculptures and drawings directly with and into the landscape—Smithson created a spiral jetty in the Great Salt Lake, Heizer carved out huge holes in the desert, and De Maria spiked an open plain with metal rods and drew mile-long marks across a barren vista.[8]

Carlson/Strom subject this historic form of land art to their investigations of the social and political implications inherent to art production. What effect does carving a canyon have on the local ecology? What does it mean to radically reform a landscape or cut into it? But even more so, *who* is allowed to make and leave such monumental marks?

Four Parallel Lines, 2007, is based on Walter De Maria's first large-scale earthwork, *Two Parallel Lines* or *Mile Long Drawing*, 1968, two shallow half-mile-long lines etched into a dry lake in the Mojave Desert. In a gesture at once critical and reverential, Carlson/Strom set out to create similarly monumental marks with Jose Bautista, Joel Gomez, Lisandrow Vicente, and Carlos Hernandez, four day laborers from Guatemala who live in Northern California. Instead of the still, brittle desert surface, however, *Four Parallel Lines* takes place on the pliable sands of a Marin County beach. The four men face the camera with wooden planks in the sand that are roughly the size of their bodies and evocative of their daily construction work. They slowly walk backwards and drag the planks to leave deep gouges in the sand. A gleaming white tide rolls in and eventually washes away their "drawing." In contrast to De Maria's spare and static chalk marks, *Four Parallel Lines* presents us with an endless loop of the act of mark-making. His two lines are not merely doubled but injected with movement—in the softness of the sand, the bodies of the men, and the temporal format of video—to infuse the minimal earthwork with the richness of humanity.

But the recurrent vanishing of the men's work quickly becomes a metaphor for the social and legal invisibility of their daily work in building America's infrastructure. All types of invisible labor—construction, housework, gardening, child care, and so on—evoke a politically silent underclass.

Like *Meadowlark*, *Four Parallel Lines* is a meditation on the relationship between the land and the body and their representations in art history. But it is also a deeply collaborative work between Carlson, Strom, Bautista, Gomez, Vicente, and Hernandez that explores labor in a complex dialogue with body and landscape. *Four Parallel Lines* is related to two other videos, *Cuenta* and *Sloss, Kerr Rosenberg, and Moore*, both from 2007, as part of the *Real People* series. The three video performances underscore the importance of collaboration to Carlson/Strom's project.

Their communal working method is, in part, a means to complicate the once-traditional binary of artist and mute subject/model by establishing an environment in which subjects have clear agency over their actions. Such a traditional binary in art connotes a dominant power structure and enables "othering," or the relegating of people to objects of desire or fear. Historically, "othered" subjects have been the female nude or non-Western men and women, but as Carlson/Strom suggest, they can be anyone and everyone.

The *Real People* series, in which the artists collaborated with small groups of non-professional dancers bound together by their vocation, is an extension of Carlson's dance practice and both artists' shared interest in public art. Carlson and Strom observed these groups and worked with them to create performance videos based on their everyday lives.

Bautista, Gomez, Vicente, and Hernandez joined forces with the artists in a second video, *Cuenta*. We now see them seated in a large gymnasium belting out a collaged score of spoken language and song fragments in Spanish. Emerging from a dialogical process among the artists and the workers, the vocal score draws on traditions of extended voice and improvisation as a simultaneously factual and fictional representation of the men's biography. The camera frames their faces in a series of close-ups to produce an intimate and multi-faceted visual portrait of the four men.

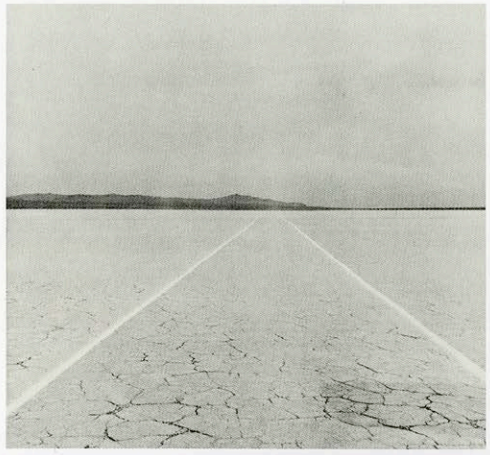
The third performance video in this group, *Sloss, Kerr Rosenberg, and Moore*, was made with four practicing attorneys: John Sloss, Chet Kerr, Scott Rosenberg, and Thomas Moore. The men are squared-off with their backs to one another, but they are standing, dancing really, in a stark, rectilinear office hallway. Their movements and score range from incomprehensible, grim mutterings to boyish squeals and squats, to a direct address of the viewer, as Rosenberg yells, "You are the biggest baby in this room!" Here, the dance and vocals are merged into a single work to underscore the performative aspects of litigating, the pressures of the legal system, and ultimately, the lawyers' individual humanity.

While *Cuenta* and *Sloss, Kerr, Rosenberg, and Moore* are not based on any direct art historic quotation as are the previous works, they similarly address the body within a system of representation—in this case the economic system of labor. Whereas one form of work is based in legal and linguistic systems—law is perhaps the most powerful and manipulated form of language in society—the other addresses physical and ultimately invisible labor systems. Together they exemplify increasingly divergent economic strata in this country and across the globe.

Accordingly, each of these works is set in radically different environments or landscapes: *Four Parallel Lines*, at the beach; *Cuenta*, in a gymnasium at an abandoned military base, and *Sloss, Kerr, Rosenberg, and Moore*, near a bank of elevators at a law firm. In all three, the setting emphasizes the social location (or landscape) of each performing group: the liminal space of nationalism, the forgotten space of national protection and competitive play, and the veritable halls of legal power.

Madame 710

In shifting from literal outdoor terrains to metaphorical economic landscapes, Carlson/Strom continue to address the American cultural landscape with a return to overt art historical reference in their three-channel triptych, *Madame 710*, 2008. Scored to Mozart's joyous motet *Exsultate Jubilate, Madame 710* is a dialogue with a May 1974 performance by the German artist Joseph Beuys, entitled *Coyote: I like America and America Likes Me*. After World War II, Beuys embarked on a well-chronicled career of metaphysically-inflected performances and sculptures and a cultivation of a larger-than-life artistic persona fueled by a series of apocryphal, self-perpetuated legends that connected his personal biography to the larger political and historical context. Using art to rectify and heal the horrors of life, specifically the trauma of the war on the German national psyche, Beuys developed a strong and influential mode of artistic activism in what



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3. Walter De Maria, *Mile Long Drawing*,1968 Mojave Desert, California, 1968
4. Still from Carlson and Strom, *Four Parallel Lines*, 2007, single-channel video

he termed "social-sculpture"—a view of society itself as a great work of art. In this light, the artist's role was to be a shaman-type figure in service of the greater good, a vehicle for communicating and healing.

Coyote was performed at the René Block Gallery at 409 West Broadway in New York during the artist's second trip to the United States. For this now somewhat infamous performance, Beuys locked himself in the gallery space with a live coyote for three days. The gallery was filled with highly allegorical items: a bolt of felt, which the artist wrapped around himself, a cane, hay, and daily deliveries of the *Wall Street Journal*.[9] The coyote, an animal important to western Native American nations, symbolized for Beuys "the psychological trauma point of the United States energy constellation."[10] This was a reference to the destructive forces of American capitalism on animals and native people, or what Beuys understood to be "Spiritual America." The performance was open to the public, but it mostly lives on in grainy photographs and in art historical lore.

In *Madame 710*, Carlson/Strom reinscribe Beuys's critique with a feminist viewpoint, in tune with cultural shifts during the intervening three-and-a-half decades. Most notably, the coyote is now a black and white Holstein cow—#710—from a nearby dairy farm in Carlisle, Massachusetts. The mythic and masculine Beuys is replaced by a dancing woman—Carlson—wearing a clear plastic coat partially filled with U.S. dollars. Retaining Beuys's system of material allegories, *Madame 710* presents America's animal spirit as the domesticated, industrial cow—a vehicle of production and consumption—and the artist as a plastic and money-clad milkmaid. As with Beuys, animal and artist are contained in a white, gallery-type space, indicating their shared existence within the inescapable system of production and consumption symptomatic of American late-capitalism. Strom's camera reminds us of their common condition as producers by repeatedly rhyming the engorged udders of the cow with Carlson's breasts—manifestations of nourishment that in the case of the cow, and perhaps artist, is heavily commodified.

As Carlson dances to the lively Mozart—its classically-structured three movements are echoed in the video's symmetrical triptych format—she responds to her partner's bovine motions. Thus, #710 slowly turns to eye her partner's movement and Carlson, in turn, lowers her hooded head and extends her hand to the cow's muzzle. If the interaction between Beuys and his wild coyote was fraught with a wild aggression—Beuys, completely covered in thick opaque felt, towered over the small coyote—Carlson and the cow share their gallery space in good humor and mutual respect. In a poignant moment, Carlson trades places with the coyote by lowering herself before the enormous animal, who serves as a veritable stand-in for Beuys. This shift in scale is exaggerated by Strom's camera angles and staccato editing that compresses the two figures against the white background: #710 looms over a seemingly Lilliputian Carlson. Video interjects even more forcefully in the timing and pacing of *Madame 710* to create a three-screen, non-linear, and fragmented narrative. Its skewed temporality is laid bare in the very beginning, when we see a pile of hay drop in reverse, floating up toward the ceiling, or heaven, with the exuberance of Mozart. Time moves backwards, forwards, and every which way in this work.

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5. Joseph Beuys *I Like America and America Likes Me*,1974, René Block Gallery, New York

6. Still from Carlson and Strom, *Madame 710*, 2008, three-channel video

Ultimately, *Madame 710* provides a light counterpoint to Beuys's grim critique of American consumer society, but it is no less critical. Carlson/Strom offer an alternative to existing in a consumer-based, or any, system. If Beuys positioned the artist as a shaman, a connective figure between the spiritual and natural world and society, then Carlson/Strom propose a feminist revision in a collaborative model. In their dual nature of art production, Carlson performs as Strom frames, records, and edits, manipulating the temporal essence of the performance. Their two-pronged actions suggest that by recovering history and reinterpreting it in critical ways—by understanding it as a creation of the present as well as the past—we are able to perform our own cultural positions as strategic gestures that do not maintain or reinforce a system but generate something altogether different.

Madame 710, with its gallery-inhabiting cow, is both absurd and touching—as, perhaps, is life. Indeed, this entire new group of performance videos presented by Carlson/Strom effects the same careful balance of humor and gravitas, of critical redress and affirmation of artistic traditions, and of past and present. Using the strategies of collaborative performance and time-based art work, they examine the moving body within a range of landscapes: the physical western vista, the economic terrain of late-capitalist America, and the artistic traditions that construct these literal and ideological images. In doing so, Carlson/Strom cultivate a dialogue between the spectator and environment that turns a questioning eye to the past to look into the future.

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Notes:

1 See Michael Rush, *Video Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2007). Examples include Nam June Paik, who famously fitted Charlotte Mooreman with a TV bra as she played her cello in 1971. Artists like Vito Acconci and Bruce Nauman turned their cameras onto their own bodies to investigate mediated perception. Pioneering feminist artists Lynda Benglis, Carolee Schneeman, and Dara Birnbaum used video to question the female nude in art history and broader images of women in the media.

2 Homi Bhabha, *Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 2004): 3. Bhabha writes, "Terms of cultural engagement, whether antagonist or affiliative, are produced performatively. The representation of difference must not be hastily read as the reflection of the *pre-given* ethnic or cultural traits set in the fixed tablet of tradition. The social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective, is a complex on-going negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation. The 'right' to signify from the periphery of authorized power and privilege does not depend on the persistence of tradition; it is resourced by the power of tradition to be reinscribed through the conditions of contingency and contradictoriness that attend upon the lives of those who are 'in the minority.' The recognition that tradition bestows is a partial form of identification. In restaging the past it introduces other, incommensurable cultural temporalities in the invention of tradition. This process estranges any immediate access to an originary identity or a 'received' tradition. The borderline engagements of cultural difference may as often be consensual as conflictual; they may confound our definition of tradition and modernity; realign the customary boundaries between the private and the public, high and low; and challenge normative expectations of development and progress."

3 Malcolm Andrews, *Landscape and Western Art* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1999): 1, 7.

4 See Peter H. Hassrick, Melissa J. Webster, *Frederic Remington: A Catalogue Raisonné of Paintings, Watercolors and Drawings* (Cody, Wy.: Buffalo Bill Historical Center in association with University of Washington Press, Seattle, Washington, 1996). For the majority of the 20th century, Remington's depictions of the west were widely accepted as factual reportage—as accurate views of life in the late 19th- century—reinforced by his earlier career as an illustrator and writer. But by 1908, the Western states were primarily settled and Remington was circulating *history* images of the "Old West" —scenes loosely based on his travels in the 1880s. Furthermore, his imagery was now based on buffalo from the Bronx Zoo and costumed models in his New Rochelle studio, adding a new layer to the term "simulating" in this painting. See Alexander Nemerov, *Frederic Remington and Turn-of-the-Century America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995): 7-8.

5 Remington's notebooks and journals reveal his not uncommon view of Native Americans as the "perfect animal" and his interest in the work of 19th-century philosopher John Fiske's ideas of social evolution and the dominance of the Anglo-Saxon race above all other peoples. Nemerov (1995): 9-10; 28.

6 In 1934, the Indian Reorganization Act was passed by Congress in an effort to promote Native American reaffirmation and cultural revival. In 1939 that congress attempted to remove sculptures from public view that were considered overtly racist—depictions of Native Americans as murderous or dangerous—without success. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, organized the exhibition *Indian Art of the United States* in 1941, with an introduction by Eleanor Roosevelt, that highlighted the work of Native Americans as another gesture to repair the legacy of racist and problematic depictions of Native culture by United States artists.

7 See also William H. Truettner, ed., *The West as America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820-1920* (Washington : Published for the National Museum of American Art by the Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991)

8 Ben Tufnell, *Land Art* (London: Tate; New York: Distributed in the U.S. by Harry N. Abrams, 2006): 6-19.

9 For Beuys, felt was a wartime material of warmth and nurture, which he used extensively in his sculpture. The cane became something of an antenna for him, the hay was ground cover for the coyote, and the newspapers both marked the passage of time and reinforced his vision of America as a consumer-based society centered on a capitalist structure.

10 Joseph Beuys, "Coyote," in *Energy Plan for the Western Man: Joseph Beuys in America, Writings by and Interviews with the Artists* (New York, 1990): 141.