Carlson/Strom: New Performance Video

DeCordova Museum and Sculpture Park

1.

Track Marks

At the beginning, it was risky, that being the name of the horse I once watched Ann ride bareback, around midnight, in a paddock near Irvine, California. Mary Ellen was part of a seminar I was teaching on a vagueness called theory, and she arranged an excursion to meet Risky and her girl friend as a way to get the conversation off the page. They would both, in due time, ride into the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles as the centerpiece of *West*, a rodeo/video roundup Ann and Mary Ellen produced in 1997. At the time I understood Risky to be large, brown, beautiful distraction. I did not yet understand her to be a four-legged piece of advice.

That didn't come for several years, also in the middle of the night, when I was lucky enough to spot Eadweard Muybridge's horse galloping across the hills of Montana. The horse that won Leland Stanford his bet—who I remember reading, somewhere, was also called Risky—had been animated by Mary Ellen and projected by a contraption the size of a Prius through the open doors of a boxcar that formed part of a train that Carlson/Strom, as they had by then officially become, commandeered for Geyserland, a sprawling, unwieldy work intended to memorialize the trauma that is the American West. Everything and everyone piled on that train: historical photographs incarnated in *tableaux vivant*, projections of buffalo stampeding off a cliff, a butoh hiker inching down the aisles, Crow drummers, leathery ranchers playing poker, Ann's cranky mother, various curators, local bed and breakfast owners, stray philanthropists and uniformed ticket inspectors. Some of these people had been invited or paid to participate, but not, when I asked Ann and Mary Ellen, all of them, certainly not the drivers who pulled to the side of the high-

way to watch buffalo falling down a rock face. What with the hundreds of people involved things were happening in this collaboration that not been envisioned and were not in fact ever seen by the artists, who were busy either troubleshooting the tech or huckstering over the public address system.

It was beautiful. It was risky: a gift without expectation of reward. It was a conversation: the strategy that forms and constitutes the work of Carlson/Strom, themselves now structured as a conversation. Their works are a coupling of gazes—private, small, intense, choreographed intimacies that exact attention. Something follows instructions, something else marks with excessive enthusiasm, something else again, deaf to instructions, is welcomed to speak. Something is being memorialized. This is usually a matter of arranging to forget, but Carlson/Strom ask of their performers, their viewers and themselves the effort necessary to extract stillness from confusion, silence, and the work of interpretation.

A big cow, for example, and a small dancer, together in a white cube. One set of functional muscles flexes next to the other, at once conjoined and forced apart by wary curiosity. The dancer, incompletely costumed in clear vinyl and money, calls attention to the many locations on the cow where pink skin shows through fur, making the cow, *Madame 710*, a Holstein, look naked. It seems credible that the cow finds the dancer funny. The duet evokes Joseph Beuys's sojourn with a frisky coyote, of course, but as no one here is playing either wild animal or shaman the conversation, edged with fear, is respectful.

Or, on a gray day, four men, garbed as laborers, walking side by side, keep pace as they push planks down a stony beach to draw a set of four parallel lines in the sand. As they walk, extending the drawing in stately progression, the incoming tide enters the very top of the frame to erase their painstaking work. It is not, however, an unhappy ending. Both tide and walkers appear to possess in equal measure patience and the understanding that the loop can repeat, again and again. Or, inside what might be an old gym, the same actors chant, speak and mimic the noises of war. The closely choreographed sequence of fragments that make up the score has been culled from their own movements. The camera circles in a dance of its own attention, looking while searching out what it had rehearsed them perform, stuttering over flashes of ecstasy or frustration, pausing when it finds what it had wished. Or, in a wood-paneled corporate hallway, four white men in suits and ties theatricalize a sequence of movements in which grabbing, catching and slapping are combined with equally stylized yoga moves. The men are lawyers. Transformed into rueful comedy, their gestures of curiosity, relaxation, persuasion, distraction, attack and counterattack—stripped to the essentials—have been resequenced in the cause of someone else's narrative.

Photographers steal souls. Carlson/Strom use video and performance to steal the habits of other living creatures. More exactly, they observe the gestures of their prey, then borrow tiny details to dissect them, consider them, subtract the superfluous, and return them, amplified. They interest themselves in those movements created, honed and em bedded in muscular memory by the living of life, in the way that the gestural rhetoric of any given profession is inscribed upon the body. This entails regarding and being regarded. Carlson/Strom make it evident, that as partners in this transaction, they subject themselves to the same intense scrutiny and expect the same patience that they ask of their models. As their procedures are neither innocent nor combative, their results are neither casual conversations nor reductive depictions of power relations, but (to invoke one of their collaborators in the discourse of cultural histories) social sculpture. In their case, however, the sculpture is assembled with the specific tools of the two different strategies of materiality in which they are expert: the body and the camera. These works are the residue of a process in which the camera and the body are equal partners to a conversation.

Risky.

Catherine Lord

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1. *Geyser Land*, 2003, site-specific video installation, Montana