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Untitled Feminist Show: Nudity as Fluidity

JULIE VATAIN-CORFDIR

Keywords: nudity; gender fluidity; identity; experimental theater; Young Jean Lee; *Untitled Feminist Show*

Untitled Feminist Show (2012) de Young Jean Lee met en scène six performeuses qui s'adressent au public par le mouvement, l'énergie et l'émotion, sans l'aide (ou l'obstacle) de vêtements, d'accessoires, de maquillage... ni même de mots. S'appuyant sur les enquêtes identitaires menées par l'art féministe et la pensée d'Agamben sur la nudité, cet article explore l'esthétique jubilatoire du spectacle et sa politique de fluidité, pour mieux définir le traitement original que propose Lee de l'incarnation, dans sa forme entière et puissante.

In the 1490s, Sandro Botticelli recreated a lost allegorical painting from Ancient Greece, presumably as a defense against slanderous accusations. The resulting *Calumny of Apelles* hangs in the Uffizi, where a contemporary visitor can still be arrested by the powerful contrast between the overwhelming entanglement of the central perfidious figures—displayed in billowing clothes, symbolical colors and dynamic artifice—and the gleaming vulnerability of the two naked bodies pushed to the edges of the painting: the calumny's victim, dragged along on the floor, and the unheeded Truth, pointing to the heavens on the far left. One is a picture of misery, the other an evocation of Venus; both, though equipped with the loincloth of modesty, align nudity with authenticity and innocence, reminding us that the artistic nude has long been the expression of ideas through form, relating the human body, “by analogy, to all structures that have become part of our imaginative experience” (Clark, 370). Granted, paintings of the Quattrocento are a far cry from contemporary American performance, yet Botticelli's allegorical handling of nudity still yields a productive starting point. Centuries later, can nudity, as an artistic gesture, be free of symbolical meaning? What relationship, if any, does the raw materiality of the naked body entertain with truth, or vindication? Throughout the history of the arts, the naked figure has had the potential both to embody ideals and to reject them, repudiating aestheticizing conventions and stripping everything bare—bodies as well as language and tradition. In light of this paradox, the present article means to explore the physical and conceptual resonance, and radiance, of the six naked bodies staged by experimental playwright and director Young Jean Lee in her genre-defying *Untitled Feminist Show*, proffered as a “utopian feminist experience”.¹

¹ Lee mentioned in a program note that the show was an attempt to create a “utopian feminist experience,” a phrase which was picked up by most reviewers. See the *New York Times* review (Isherwood), or the *New Yorker's*, where Hilton Als confessed: “I longed to be part of her utopia.”

Like Botticelli's figures, Lee's performers express themselves in the nude and without words; but emphatically *unlike* them, they are far from static or set in a single attitude whose meaning is to be deciphered by the viewer. Lee's cast of six performers and dancers, with bodies that are either female-coded or transgender, are everywhere, in front of the audience and around them, moving to music with exhilarating energy, shifting from scene to scene and morphing from role to role so quickly that it is impossible to assign any univocal meaning to their mimes and dances. *Untitled Feminist Show* argues in favor of fluid identities, aiming "to create a fantasy world in which people—regardless of what gender they were assigned at birth—[can] embody a range of identities without being shamed" (UFS 7). Nudity may be "a type of costume" (Hanna 222), but in Lee's hands it is one that, perhaps counterintuitively, intends to blur boundaries and roles rather than essentialize them by removing the fabled loincloth. As the performance progresses, the viewer is prompted to wonder whether nakedness is the ultimate unveiling or, perhaps, the ultimate illusion.

The following pages will explore *Untitled Feminist Show*, using its textual description as published and prefaced by Lee in 2020, and a recording of the original performances at the Baryshnikov Arts Center in New York in 2012.² Relying on investigations of identity in feminist art (Schneider; Jones), as well as on Agamben's examination of the subtext of nudity, I will seek to place the show's aesthetics with regards to American feminist performance, and to define its original handling of identity as embodied fluidity on a stage where the naked body, though devoid of clothes and makeup, is far from conceptually bare.

Feminist Ritual Disrobed

When *Untitled Feminist Show* toured a host of venues in the United States and abroad in 2012, thoroughly nude casts were nothing new to the downtown theater scene, long used to naked bodies "washing up onto the stage" (Case 186) since the early days of *Dionysus in '69* or *Oh, Calcutta!*, and more recently confronted with the destabilizing gaze of the myriad naked models which unsettled the paradigm of viewer versus viewed in Vanessa Beecroft's installations. Lee's use of nudity is not, and does not purport to be, new, as is made clear in an author's note ironically specifying that the show "wasn't made to provide a sense of boundary-pushing novelty for highly educated sophisticates" (UFS 9). Lee's foreword further argues for a straightforward reading of the piece's inclusive feminism, and nudity:

² I am extremely grateful to Young Jean Lee and her cast—Becca Blackwell, Hilary Clark, Katy Pyle, Regina Roche, Amelia Zirin-Brown (a.k.a. Lady Rizo) and World Famous *BOB*—for their kind permission to access this private footage for the purpose of writing this article.

Untitled Feminist Show isn't a show about feminism. It doesn't attempt to explain feminism or say anything new about it. Rather, as the title indicates, this is a feminist show. [...] The performers should be completely nude throughout the entirety of the show, since any trace of clothing or decoration inevitably marks them as "feminine" or "masculine" to the audience. Hairstyling and makeup (including foundation and nail polish) shouldn't be used, for the same reason, and also to empower the performers to be fabulous as they are.

(UFS 7)

Lee's paradoxical use of nudity to bemuse, rather than clarify, gender identification, is as tongue-in-cheek as her coupling of epithets: the politically-charged "feminist" with the pictorially undetermined "untitled." Such choices signal, from the word go, the playful seriousness with which the show refuses to provide unequivocal framing or direct answers. Lee's utopian choice of nakedness to free the performers' bodies of oppressive gender labels could be reminiscent of what Karl Toepfer identifies as "mythic nudity" in 1960s performance, where the nude body "'democratically' transcends all mechanisms of difference between persons" (78), and where "the condition of being naked is in itself a salvational action" against divisive roles (79). However, her elaborate notes on working "with" nudity, which range from articulate remarks on possible misreadings of a trans performer's identity to practical tips regarding baby wipes and room temperatures, suggest an extremely considered, even sanitized approach that belies the more naïve abstraction of mythic nudity as a primordial form of innocence in which the audience is blissfully and messily invited to participate. In Lee's script, there is nothing uncontrolled about naked bodies, carefully clothed in disclaimers and an abundance of "shoulds" and "should nots."³

Untitled Feminist Show purposefully challenges its viewers to engage with what they see in the absence of clothes, narrative markers or clear-cut guidelines, in a posture described by reviewers as one of "loaded neutrality" (Rowen 150), or "a tantalizing provocation by way of a nonprovocation" (Nahm 591). Fittingly, the playing space is a plain white rectangle, luminously set against a black floor and background: a clear area, a blank slate. Over the stage hangs a long rectangular white sculpture onto which a variety of kaleidoscopic abstract images are projected, and which Lee mysteriously refers to as "*the monolith*" (UFS 15). The term connotes a monument, conjuring thoughts of ceremonies where women come to dance around a sacred stone; but here the monolith is horizontal rather than vertical, and its technological quality, glowing with visionary images, could mark it as futuristic rather than ancient. Expectations are wrongfooted as soon as they are raised: Lee's performing space is at once a blank canvas, a hallowed place for ritual, and a technically-enhanced space for the examination

³ Tellingly, Lee's first recommendation is: "Rehearse clothed whenever possible" (UFS 11), which is the direct opposite of nakedness as a workshop practice, as outlined for instance by Richard Schechner (see Lavalette).

of the 21st-century human form. On such a stage, anonymity proves emancipatory, as Miriam Felton-Dansky eloquently analyses: the lack of clothes and names does not blend the performers into a choral lack of differentiation, but rather allows them to collectively escape “the shortcomings of our own perceptual categories” (265). Jubilantly “untitled,” the performers’ individual bodies are free to embody a wide-ranging array of modalities in seventeen scenes, from rage to tenderness, from the crude humor of a mock-castration to the balletic beauty of a lesbian *pas-de-deux*, and from a humorous lesson in self-confidence to the empowering spectacle of domestic chores choreographed to rap music.

In its exposure of the female body flowing in and out of gendered roles, *Untitled Feminist Show* nods at past decades of feminist performance and body art while reconfiguring familiar images into a new aesthetic. This is made clear from the first two scenes, labelled in the script as “Cleansing ritual” (UFS 16) and “Venerating the pussy” (UFS 17). The performers enter naked through the audience, stepping and breathing in sync, “taking in the people’s reactions to their nudity” and “filling the room with their spirit” (UFS 17), before settling on stage in a symmetrical tableau. Two performers standing in the center then move together like a multiple-armed goddess, framed by a dancing pair who observe, or perhaps worship, from each side, before the group gathers to lift up one of the central figures, spreading her legs wide to “reveal [her] pussy” as the music crashes (UFS 19). Giving the word “pussy” pride of place in a dance whose balance and mystery evoke the solemnity of ritual aligns the show’s aesthetics with the tradition of reclaiming and empowerment that has infused American feminism since the Second Wave. “Pussy” is also less aggressively obscene than its synonym preferred by the “cunt art” movement, whose purpose, as analyzed by Amelia Jones, is to give agency to the female sex and to enable it to “*look back*” (172). Unlike VALIE EXPORT in her iconic “action pants,” Lee’s performer—the burlesque artist World Famous *BOB*—looks at the audience without hostility or challenge (or indeed, a machine-gun). Nor does her steady gaze play with the codes of provocation and pornography, as Annie Sprinkle has tauntingly done elsewhere (Schneider). *Untitled Feminist Show* reinvents the big reveal according to its own logic, one which gleefully and brazenly embraces the human body as a site of potentiality. Downstage from World Famous *BOB*, trans performer Becca Blackwell spreads their legs wide also, but covers their crotch and chest with their hands—not an act of shame,⁴ but the possibility of a

⁴ In a later scene, Lee has the same performer shift their attitude from “sassy” to “ashamed” and back to “towering confidence.” In the “ashamed” moment, as Blackwell again covers their crotch and breasts with their hands, Lee specifies: “This is the first moment where any performer shows any sign of shame, and it should not be funny” (UFS 54). By contrast, this designates the initial use of the “covering” gesture as more playful (belatedly choosing not to reveal, when the performer has already been fully naked for several minutes), while acknowledging the

different choice, a humorous counterpoint. The effect is disarming, and the (double) exposure evades predictability, occurring “[w]ithout aggressiveness, without sensuality, even without ostentation” (Pellois).⁵ The sincerity of the performers taking ownership of the playing space as they walk in, as well as the pleasing symmetry of the choreography, have cleared the room of threat or unease, creating a “safe space” for the opening of one’s legs and enabling the act to defuse, rather than excite, desire and shock. After only a few minutes of the show, we have seen it all: now the conversation can proceed.

Wordless and Limitless

The word “conversation” is used here in an abstract sense, for despite the fact that its author considers it a piece of theater rather than dance, the show does not offer any words, with the exception of a lyrical ballad sung in Welsh. Even the various indie pop, rap or R&B songs meticulously identified as background music are arranged as instrumentals, with occasional vocal decorations, but no lyrics. *Untitled Feminist Show* consistently refuses to explain itself through spoken language. Rather, movement is the text of the play, writing the performers’ bodies across the bare rectangle of the stage in a way that is at once “explicit”—as Rebecca Schneider describes the “explosive literality” of feminist art (114)—and opaque, since there is no speech to stabilize the ideas and emotions inferred by the audience. This seems to have divided reviewers: Charles Isherwood, who praised the show’s fearlessness, deplored its “alas, uncommunicative” wordlessness, and regretted the absence of clear-cut points about feminism. Hilton Als, on the other hand, read the show’s ambitions as having to do with spirit rather than intellect, noting that “language could potentially tip the work over into ideology, instead of the poetics of space [...] that Lee explores with such acuity.” The fluidity of meaning allowed by the spatialized body in fact runs counter to what Schneider analyses as a more typical focus on physical identifiers in feminist exposure: “the explicit body in representation is foremost a site of social markings, physical parts and gestural signatures of gender, race, class, age, sexuality—all of which bear ghosts of historical meaning” (2). While the cast of *Untitled Feminist Show* purposefully displays a range of body types and ethnicities, they hardly stand still long enough for the audience’s attention to focus on deciphering markers of identity in their nakedness. This encourages a perception of the body as constant forward movement rather than as the site of historical imprints. Bodies in fluctuating motion become the expression of a feminist utopia; an

potentially charged relationship of trans women and feminism in less inclusive contexts (see for instance Halberstam’s chapter on “Trans* Feminisms”).

⁵ “*Sans agressivité, sans sensualité, sans ostentation même.*” (My translation into English).

image which can helpfully be paralleled with queer longings for utopia as a way to mobilize the present. José Esteban Muñoz's argues that "[i]t is productive to think of utopia as a flux" (97), and this image directly resonates with the show's reliance on flowing, dancing and vibrating as signifiers of energetic and hopeful potentiality, rather than argumentative discourse.

Lee's utopia is a collective one. The performers, along with the choreographer and associate director, are presented in the script as co-creators of the show, and Lee goes so far as to summarize the action as sheer co-presence: "That's basically the show. It's six performers of different races and sizes, either assigned female at birth or transgender, who are stars of their fields" (Lee 2021 95). The playwright openly relies on the charisma of her performers to captivate the audience, particularly in the solos or duets, but through collective nudity she also federates them into a powerful ensemble. Individual confidence fuels the collaborative dynamic of the show, echoing perhaps the way Ntozake Shange's "Ladies," each identified by the color of her clothes and the tone of her stories, come together to form the choreopoem's rainbow of sisterhood in *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*. According to Amelia Jones, the possibility of finding new models to read the world through art in the 21st century is predicated on the acknowledgement that, contrary to a certain rhetoric, "we are not 'post-' identity" (245), though binaries no longer suffice to encompass it. Jones offers the critical concept of "durationality," which seeks to return the work of art to time and embodiment, avoiding objectifying fixity:

Durationality evokes the crucial notion of subjectivity as becoming—this of course was Simone de Beauvoir's crucial salvo, and Judith Butler's inspiration, and has become the key to queer models of subjectification or of how subjects might navigate the world through process rather than endless oppositional projections that seek to fix others in place in order to confirm the self.

(229)

The notion of durationality applies naturally to the time-inscribed form of theater, and helps to underscore *Untitled Feminist Show*'s central point about identity, which is the accomplished defense of fluidity. Naked durationality, with its emphasis on the limitless capacities of the body asserting itself through time without the support of speech or clothing, thus emerges as an effective way of refuting gender labels. As Lee explains outright: "the show is a demonstration of the *potential* for gender fluidity within the human form" (UFS 7-8). In a famous study, Lisa Diamond examined the relationships of dozens of women to provide scientific evidence of *sexual* fluidity; Lee's artistic approach to demonstration is different, but equally arresting, as she proposes visual and emotional evidence of *gender* fluidity, or the ability to shift

identification from one moment to the next. Daringly, and with consummate humor, she lays bare her performers' breasts and vaginas, the better to argue against body parts as limiting definers of identity. Charisma and energy are shown, again and again, to outshine any confining conception of biology.

The script specifies that at least one of the performers should have a perceptibly transgender body; in the original production, this was Blackwell, who dazzled audiences in their solo (scene 14) by “embodying a series of contrasting identities” in a matter of minutes (UFS 52), morphing seamlessly from the tall confidence of a Broadway entertainer to the athletic stance of a sparring boxer or the stooped fragility of an elderly person, or transitioning effortlessly from male to female clichés, and from one contradictory emotion to the next: swagger, shame, hysterics, confidence. Both Blackwell's body and the mutating personas embodied in these mercurial vignettes escape stable definitions: the performance we are given to see is as versatile as the emotions it provokes, as the uproarious comedy of the scene gives way to sudden moments of graver vulnerability. Nor is the transgender performer the only one whose body incarnates fluidity. Blackwell's solo echoes the shape-shifting of Amelia Zirin-Brown (a.k.a. Lady Rizo) as the witch in the earlier “fairy-tale” sequence (scene 3) where, to the trilling sound of a Mozart concerto, she transforms into a frog, chicken, tree, toddler or handsome hunter, in order to trick little girls and feed them to her goblin child. The scene evokes the many incarnations, human or otherwise, of Caryl Churchill's *Skriker* in the eponymous play, and likewise comments on cliché figures of historically disdained femininity, blurring the boundaries of good and evil as the children devour the goblin and the witch is left a bereft, inconsolable mother.

Fluidity, in fact, fuels every aspect of the show, underpinning both genre and gender. Since there are no sets or costume changes, the transitions are instantaneous: the music slowing down turns a bloodthirsty fight into a sexy dance (scenes 12 & 13), and the lights' transition from frontally white to delicately blue accompanies a shift from miming insanely grotesque sexual acts to singing a heartrendingly tender melody (scenes 7 & 8). Even the meaning of the only props in the show, frilly pink parasols, shifts from narrative to metaphoric: they appear as magical shields in the fairy tale scene, only to become joyful emblems of girly femininity, celebrated rather than despised in the following energetic parasol dance (scenes 3 & 4). The overall structure of the show itself is a demonstration of fluidity, as the wide-ranging array of moods portrayed in the first fourteen scenes finds itself reinvented as a dizzying collage in scene 15, where the performers enact “*flashbacks to previous scenes mixed with new material that pushes everything to a more intense level and creates a feeling of euphoria*” (UFS 54). The

strobe lighting and startling speed with which the performers transition from one tableau to the next make it impossible for the audience to take in everything; rather, we are struck by a rapturous profusion of shapes and meanings—the unlimited potential of the naked human form.

The Naked Mask

In a book chapter devoted to “Identity without the Person,” Agamben traces a major historical evolution in the definers of identity, from social persona attested by lineage to purely biological data on a retinal scanner. From a theatrical point of view, he reminds us that Roman mosaics depicting the actor gazing intently at his mask were replaced at the dawn of the modern age by portraits of *commedia dell’arte* performers holding their masks but looking at the viewer: a shift that points to the widening ethical gap between person and persona (48). Interestingly, he follows this line of reflection with a chapter on “Nudity,” as though the stripping of personas naturally led to the stripping of clothes, in a persistent search for the human which must, inevitably, remain incomplete: “as a form that does not allow itself to be entirely seized as it occurs, nudity is, literally, infinite: it never stops occurring. Inasmuch as its nature is essentially defective [...], nudity can never satiate the gaze to which it is offered.” (65-66) In this sense, nudity supports Lee’s project from a philosophical viewpoint: if nudity is a perpetual process, the naked form can never be circumscribed, and the gaze of the spectator, endlessly searching, participates in the performers’ balancing act to escape fixity. Full disclosure does not, and cannot, mean full definition. But where Agamben logically writes nudity as an absence, a lack (of garments), Lee, whose performers were never shown clothed to begin with, achieves her boldest artistic feat when she turns nudity into a presence, an addition—an augmentation of unadulterated charisma. This is, beyond the celebratory rhetoric, the true ontological implication of her avowed intention to “*empower the performers to be fabulous as they are*” (UFS 7, emphasis added). Rather than a mythic or Edenic concept of nudity, *Untitled Feminist Show* embraces a brash post-lapsarian one, where the naked body asserts itself with an exhilarating self-evidence that allows it to outweigh the sum of its biological data, and to outshine the need for representational meaning. The naked body may thus prove to be the most real-looking of all masks; one which clearly delineates on- and off-stage personas without offering the possibility of being discarded, or held in the hand to underline the artifice. It is therefore no surprise that the real shock to the audience, as uniformly attested by critics, should occur not as the performers enter naked at the start, but when they come back fully dressed to take their bows—an occasion which Lee, ever in control of all aspects of framing the performance, scripts as scene 17, “Curtain Call”. After an hour of

reveling in boundlessness and sheer presence, the stripping of the naked mask to reinstate very distinct public personas jolts us into retrospectively realizing that the absence of sartorial illusions was, in itself, the most irreverent of illusions.

The performers' names are projected onto the monolith as they each salute the audience with an individual move: words make their way back into the performance along with clothes and real-life personalities. If, in an extension of Peggy Phelan's celebrated concept, Lee intended nudity to present her performers as "unmarked," the curtain call allows them, in a classic feminist gesture, to author their own markings, since they appear "in their own clothes" (UFS 64) and perform a step in their own style. But the memory of the dazzling plurality of identities embodied by their naked selves, both individually and collectively, is still so strongly imprinted on the spectators' retinas that the question lingers: are the performers as we last see them firmly defined by their own choices, or is that final image just another iteration of the show's fierce defense of potentiality? The all-embracing logic of the show overflows into the liminal space of the curtain call, in a destabilizing move typical of Lee's aesthetics: in her following play, the audience is welcomed into the theater and led through a show about *Straight White Men* by two transgender "People in Charge" of color, whose charmingly ironical presence is minutely scripted, down to their responses to possible spectator complaints about the pre-show music. Such polite, but pointed, incursion into the audience's expectations of safety participates in what Anthony Hatch, refashioning Rancière's well-known phrase, describes as Lee's "radical *redistribution* of the sensible" (92). Hatch writes this about Lee's treatment of race in *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven* (2006) and *The Shipment* (2009), where she explosively overturns the logic that aligns personal identity with cultural clichés and closes the gap between outward determination and individuality. But the analysis can be extended to *Untitled Feminist Show*: with gender as with ethnicity, Lee humorously "pr[ies] the gap back open by any theatrical means available" (Hatch 92), adventurously trafficking in the labile space between person and persona(s).

As a concluding thought, let us return to *The Calumny of Appelles*, where nudity vindicates truth, enlightening our gaze to the shining innocence of those who have nothing to hide. To some extent, *Untitled Feminist Show* can be said to partake in a similar logic when it uses nudity to discard burdensome perceptions, to acknowledge the power of roles despised in history, and to awaken the audience to new potential in the human form. Within the painter's frame as on the experimental stage, nudity as a signifier prompts the viewer to reassess the whole composition. But whereas, in Botticelli's view, the naked truth is allegorically stable, in Young Jean Lee's vision, the utopian truth of nudity, if it exists at all, proves to be nothing but

movement, change, and symbols morphing into their opposites in an ironic refusal of transparency. Keenly aware of the magnetic power of the naked form, Lee dynamically embraces it while baffling its legibility, so that in the end nudity vindicates only its own wondrous opacity.

One of Agamben's final remarks on nudity is that it "seems to call the primacy of the face into question" (88), shifting the focus away from that more usual site of expressivity. In the collective sequences of *Untitled Feminist Show*, this deflection of the gaze excites a renewed perception of embodied eloquence, as the eye is drawn to the symmetry of dance shapes or the spellbinding jiggle of flesh rather than the lineaments of faces. But in the solos interspersed throughout, the opposite is true: the performers' engagement with the audience reinscribes their gazes and faces into their bodies, to the point of (almost) letting us forget their nakedness as we strive to follow their elaborate mimes. While the opening choreography of the show led to a "pussy reveal," anchoring nudity in the body, its last dance sequence culminates in a performer carefully pulling back another's hair to "reveal [their] euphoric face" (UFS 62). In an ultimate display of theatrical fluidity, the jubilant exploration of the naked body leads us back, with infinite delicacy, to the trembling intimacy of the naked human face.

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