



ZEESY POWERS' **Projected Realities**

Friday, November 12, 8:00 pm
& Saturday, November 13, 12:00 - 5:00 pm

Gallery TPW

Zeesy Powers' Projected Realities

Gabrielle Moser

The first time I encountered Zeesy Powers' live, projected, animation performances, I was struck by how magical they are. Not magical as an over-the-top, this-is-too-good-to-be-true adjective (though that was undoubtedly part of my viewing experience), but magical in their ability to seemingly conjure up creatures, narratives and relationships out of thin air. Conjuring, in many ways, seems an apt metaphor for her practice. Using hand-drawn and painted images that are animated and projected onto a screen to call forth a fantastical, imaginary world, Powers then physically interacts with her creations as though they are real. In *beginningmiddleend* (2005), for instance, dozens of tiny, nymph-like reproductions of the artist emerge from Powers' body and lead her on a wild chase through mountains, caves and a sea made from strands of her own hair before being forcibly returned to her body by being eaten and excreted. By sharing the screen space with her animated characters, Powers' performances question how we physically experience and relate to the world. Her animated creations' convincing and unnerving interactions with the artist's body draw attention to the distancing and mediation that takes place between our bodies and our often disembodied experiences of reality.

This sense of disconnection between our bodies and our experiences is amplified in Powers' performances through her manipulation of time. Though her animated characters' actions are predetermined, recorded and re-played for each performance, Powers' own (often exhausting) physical movements are performed live. In her work, Powers squares off against enemies of her own invention time and time again, in a repetitive way that suggests the working-through of a traumatic event. According to psychoanalytic theory, we can only make sense of a difficult or traumatic experience by repeatedly narrating our experience of it; we achieve a feeling of having conquered or mastered it by repeating it, transferring the experience into our everyday lives where we can come to terms with it.¹ Similarly, each of Powers' performances represents a new attempt for the artist to

physically reconcile with monstrous versions of herself that she has created. Such a reconciliations are, of course, impossible, since Powers has rigged the game from the start. As both animator and performer, she has scripted her own demise in a strategy that plays with the limits of her own agency and control. As she puts it, "Though it seems like I'm controlling the projection, as its creator, in reality the projection is pre-planned and pre-choreographed: as a performer, I'm the one who has to accommodate the projection, the storyline, the narrative."

These tensions between premeditated control and improvisation, between projected fantasies and live, embodied realities, also characterize the act of invoking or conjuring up unseen spirits. As art historian Jan Verwoert has written, strategies of repetition and reenactment in contemporary art operate as a kind of invocation, or a conjuring, of ghosts who existed in the past, but whose speech continues to have "manifest effects on the lives of the living."² However, to invoke these ghosts, Verwoert warns, is not to have complete control over them, but to instead negotiate with them in the present: "The task is to 'learn to live *with* ghosts'," he writes.³ This aspect of negotiation is key to Powers' performances. Though there is something magical or spectral about Powers' creations, her antagonists are not ghostly, but rather incredibly material, flesh-and-blood creations: blood, claws, hair and other bodily fluids frequently emanate from her and her alter egos. In works such as *The Beast* (2005), the artist's silhouette meets a twin version of herself that transforms from human form into a beastly character, growing grotesque appendages, claws and a snout. Powers, in an attempt to coexist with her monstrous reflection, cautiously approaches the beast and tries to befriend it, but the animation attacks the artist, swiping at her side and releasing a flood of animated guts. Powers collapses, the beast inhabits her body and together the hybrid human-monster figure walks off into the landscape.

While physical violence accompanies negotiation and coexistence in *The Beast*, in her more recent projects, such as *The Ghost* (2009), Powers wills her body to accommodate and negotiate with the depopulated, painted, animated and projected environments she inhabits. Rather than arguing

with ghosts, in these new works Powers posits experience as ghostly. The scenarios she creates for herself are dynamic, violent, and yet ephemeral, attempting to mirror the illusory qualities she perceives in our everyday experiences. It is perhaps fitting that this recent work, including a new project titled *Projected Realities* (2010), sees Powers use the bodies of others for the first time, employing trained dancers who will perform her choreography in a temporary performative environment in the gallery. In the lead up to the debut of these new performances, I spoke with the artist about how she conceives of her own role, and the role of the body, in these projects.

Gabrielle Moser: What can you tell me about the two performances you're preparing for Gallery TPW?

Zeesy Powers: On the first night, there are two performances featuring myself as the performer, including a longer projection piece I've been working on for the past year, called *The Ghost*, and a new piece called *TOTAL PANIC*, which came out of that performance. Whereas *The Ghost* is more of a personal reflection on the pressures of participating in contemporary society, *TOTAL PANIC* is trying to deal with that society itself.



Zeesy Powers, performance documentation of *The Ghost*, 2009. Photo: Dorota Lech

Then on the second day there will be a daylong performance we're calling a "performance environment." Professional dancers will be there, more as kinetic sculptural elements, without any sense of event: no live music, no anticipation. The audience will experience this more as an installation or a painting than as an event, which is weird considering there will be real people there all day. I am hoping the increased intimacy between the dancers and the viewer will end up creating an even more uncomfortable sense of separation.

GM: I think of your projection work and performances as being about a kind of introspective exploration where you face off against your own demons. With *Projected Realities*, you seem to be moving in a new direction by using other people's bodies as part of the live performance environment. How did this shift come about?

ZP: When I was working on *The Ghost* in Japan (at CCA Kitakyushu), I felt that it might be the last piece that I put myself in for a while. And one of the artists that was also at the residency had been a dancer and really encouraged and almost challenged me to develop a piece where I would act as the choreographer rather than as a performer. We would talk a lot about feminism and the history in performance and



Zeesy Powers, animation still from *TOTAL PANIC*, 2010.

body art of young women putting their bodies into their work and then what happens afterwards in terms of the way that work is received and circulated.

At the time, Joan Jonas, the pioneering video and performance artist, was showing a recent piece at the art centre where we were in Japan. Older women's bodies are still taboo in performance art, even though so much of the field is female-driven and focused on the female body. The canonical works are still young women's bodies that are nude, vulnerable. I was coming up against this strange irony that, no matter how much you want to say something with your body, the fact remains that, to many people, in terms of audience, curators, patrons and other artists, the work is read as being about your body rather than about the narrative you are trying to create using your body as a medium. With *Projected Realities*, I'm trying to deal with that tension by working with professional dancers whose field is expression-through-movement. In a way, it de-personalizes the performance and de-centralizes the role of my body by having professionals take over the role of interacting with the audience and the painted or projected environment.

GM: What also strikes me about this strategy of working with and directing other people is that it adds another layer of translation or representation to your practice. You're not just working with your own body, in the moment of representation, but you're now entering into a process of negotiation with the dancers to represent and realize your ideas.

ZP: I think that ties back to the notion of projection, which goes beyond just the literal projection of light and imagery in my practice. I'm also interested the process of imposing your ideas on other people, and the idea of projection as prognostication, in terms of a business plan, or a market report and even our cultural expectations, of how this language of capitalism has pervaded many of our cultural practices.

GM: Yes, but it also has connotations of the supernatural, such as astral projection, hauntings or phantasmagorias.

I guess there is a relationship between the language of performance, capitalism and the supernatural because they are all intangible things.

ZP: Definitely. They all have a stake in ephemerality and the illusion of the real.

GM: The body, including the physicality of the body, has always been a key theme in your projection and performance pieces. How does the idea of embodiment inform *Projected Realities*, the new performative environment you are making?

ZP: I was drawn to dance because it is such a physical art form in a context where most disciplines are becoming increasingly disembodied and digital. As digital music has become a major part of how contemporary music is made, and as art and theory have turned to postmodernism and become increasingly cerebral, dance has this incredible appeal as a visceral, non-verbal practice. The experience of both performing and watching it is so embodied, which is in stark contrast to the effects of technology, which disconnect our physical selves from our experience of the physical environment.

Panic, which is a dominant theme in this body of work, is also a point of tension between embodied action and cerebral inaction. It is speculative and comes from our imagined projections into the future. My projection works then reflect on how we respond to these imagined futures by either allowing that anxiety to overwhelm us and being passive within the flow of events, or by trying to take action and make change to avoid that future.

END NOTES

¹ The notion of working-through a traumatic event was first introduced by Sigmund Freud in his 1914 essay "Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through," but has since entered the feminist psychoanalytic theory and the popular discourse of self-help books.

² Jan Verwoert, "Living with Ghosts: From Appropriation to Invocation in Contemporary Art," *Art & Research: A Journal of Ideas, Contexts and Methods*, vol. 1, no. 2 (Summer 2007), p. 1-7, 5.

³ Verwoert 7.

CREDITS

Based in Toronto, **Zeesy Powers'** practice spans multiple disciplines including performance, painting and social practice. In 2009 she told people exactly what she thought of them in front of a live audience at a corporate "Innovation Conference," confusing many with her lack of product. In 2008 she gave away \$1000 as part of the Zeesy Powers Grant. In 2007 she was anyone's girlfriend for 3 minutes. A graduate of OCAD, her work has been exhibited and screened across North America, Europe and Asia. Her recent projection performance, *The Ghost*, has been shown at CCA Kitakyushu, Yahata (2009); the Palomar5 Festival, Berlin (2009); at Drawn and Quarterly, Montreal (2010); and at 533 Gallery, Los Angeles (2010).

Dancers:

Olivia Buckle
Amelia Ehrhardt
Alicia Grant
Julia Male
Minae Omi

Music and Sound:

Alia O'Brien
Andrew Zukerman

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ABOUT THE WRITER

Gabrielle Moser is a writer, curator and PhD student studying art history and visual culture at York University in Toronto. She has curated exhibitions for Sleepwalker Projects, Vtape, Xspace, The Leona Drive Project and Gallery TPW. Her writing appears in *Canadian Art*, *C magazine*, *esse*, *Fillip*, *Invisible Culture* and in Gallery 44's book Emergence: Contemporary Photography in Canada.

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