WHO WAS THAT WOMAN?

by Helena Reckitt





Precise, sculptural and strikingly hand-pleated, Le Klint lamp-shades are classics of mid-century modernism. But a perverse plan meant that, until recently, these furnishings were far more famous than the woman whose name they bear. In 1938, at the age of 18, Klint signed a contract drawn up by her lamp-manufacturing family that forced her to stop making or advertising lamps under her own name. However, her family continued to market the successful Le Klint line while Klint lost contact with them,

barring a monthly stipend worth 100 Euros. Eventually, though, she countered her family's attempts to erase her from history by returning to making lamps, publishing her designs in a DIY craft magazine, and writing her memoirs, *Erindringstrade (Memory Threads)*. The 1998 book's account of identity crises and the privatization of the artist's name caught the attention of the young Danish artist Pia Rönicke who, in 2004, devised an exhibition about Klint called *Without a Name*.

Presenting a fragmented portrait of the now elderly designer, this show incorporated videos, slide projections, printed ephemera and lamps in the Le Klint style. The latter were fabricated by Rönicke following Klint's published directions, their folded paper construction echoing the loops and folds in Klint's story and introducing a surprisingly domestic note to the otherwise spare installation. Rönicke's decision to make the lamps by hand stages a gesture of empathy with the older designer, suggesting a desire to understand her creative processes on an intimate, tactile level. "The physical act of copying is a phenomenological process," comments the American artist Andrea Bowers about the hand-written letters she transcribed for her 2005 show Letters to an Army of Three. "It's a way of learning and understanding that goes beyond just reading or listening, and I think it is very powerful." This embodied homage also links to other key art projects by feminists, including Judy Chicago's channelling of Georgia O'Keeffe in her flowerinspired paintings and drawings and her Womanhouse cohort Miriam Schapiro's practice of collaging reproductions of Mary Cassatt paintings into works she called "collaborations."

Evoking the flow of conversation and memory, Klint's story emerges phrase-by-phrase in slide-projected images of white plastic letters—fittingly, the kind that announce the residents in old-fashioned apartment buildings—against a dark background. "A real fiction—a story about Klint and the lamp," as one slide terms it, the narrative darts from Klint's family business to her relationship with the writer Peter Weiss, and evokes the troubled sense of self that prompted Klint's various abrupt changes of residence and occupation and a seven-year psychoanalytic consultation to help her reconstruct her identity. Folding back on itself, and punctuated with blank slides that allow the viewer to pause and take stock of Klint's dramatic biography, the story chronicles Rönicke's first meeting with Klint as well as the women's trip to Paris for the opening of Without a Name. While the project borrows crime writing's depiction of intrigue shared between detective and detected, it also introduces a spirit of mutual affirmation between the women not usually found in detective fiction. Just as the life of this creative survivor fascinates Rönicke, the artist becomes a mirror for Klint's questions about female creative autonomy. Describing her exchanges with Klint, Rönicke recalls in her slide projected texts: "she was very curious about my life./If it was possible for me to do the things I was/ Interested in, and if anyone was interested in/ What I was doing."

Without a Name exemplifies a biographical turn in contemporary art that, in important ways, has a precursor in theatre director Neil Bartlett's 1988 book Who Was That Man? A Present for Mr. Oscar Wilde. Seeking traces of the Victorian writer and convicted pederast a century after his death, Bartlett presents his hunt in sexual terms that draw out biography's erotic undercurrents. Bartlett experiences Wilde as a tangible presence who haunts his everyday activities in London and permeates his manuscript-in-progress. "His words began to ghost my writing."2 This understanding of how one writer's work influences another's—and the play between Bartlett and Wilde in their shifting roles as seeker and sought, possessor and possessed—counters the idea of homosexuality as non-reproductive. Instead, the sense of a shared history that Wilde represents influences Bartlett and his contemporaries productively as they struggle against AIDS and homophobia.

Just as Bartlett drew from Wilde, Polish artist Paulina Olowska looks to earlier female artists as enabling presences and kindred spirits. Claiming that "it is always sweeter to work with a friend, or a ghost," Olowska summons up female figures in her paintings, collages, installations and performances—from iconoclastic artists and designers to unnamed models and dancers. Drawn especially to women who made the presentation and performance of self central to their artistic practice, her work stages a fascination with the creative possibili-

- Eungie Joo, "DIY SCHOOL: Andrea Bowers and Eungie Joo in Conversation," in *Nothing is Neutral: Andrea Bowers* (Los Angeles: RedCat, 2006), 55.
- Neil Bartlett, Who Was That Man? A Present for Mr. Oscar Wilde (London: Serpent's Tail, 1988), 26.
- 3 Isla Leaver-Yap, "Paulina Olowska: And It Is Time," Map Magazine 16 (Winter 2008).

PAGES 31 & 32 Manon de Boer, Sylvia Kristel, Paris, 2003, super-8 film transferred to betacam IMAGE COURTESY OF JAN MOT, BRUSSELS

ties of striking a pose and making a scene. The gesture of giving space to other artists in her works is both generously self-effacing and unapologetically narcissistic, as Olowska's bobhaired, stylishly clad subjects often resemble her. As such, they function both as individuals with distinct biographies and as stand-ins for the artist. Olowska's appropriation of images of glamorous women might not seem obviously feminist, but it has been pivotal to feminism's development, as Maria Elena Buszek shows in her 2006 book Pin-up Grrrls: Feminism, Sexuality, Popular Culture. Linking the female pin-up and the women's movement to their mid-19th-century origins, Buszek investigates how Victorian actresses' and burlesque performers' presentation of themselves as liberated—on and off the stage—provided valuable symbols of women's emancipation that later boosted the women's suffrage movement. Not only did suffragettes use pictures of famous stage performers in their campaigns, but they also took on "the self-consciously stylish image and performative feminism of the actress as tools through which suffrage protests might be turned into persuasive 'parades."4

4 Maria Elena Buszek, Pin-Up Grrrls: Feminism, Sexuality, Popular Culture (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 23.

This strain of what Buszek terms "theatrical feminism"—prevalent in the early 20th century and between the world wars—took a knock during the 50s' backlash against feminism, only to return with a vengeance in the 60s. Her mixed-media canvas Pauline Boty Acts Out One of Her Paintings For a Popular Newspaper (2006) explores a key, though largely overlooked, figure from this era: artist Pauline Boty. The only prominent woman in the British Pop Art movement, Boty died from leukemia at age 28 and her work, which examined mass-media depictions of celebrity, has only recently received scholarly attention. This neglect stems partly from Boty's habit of modelling nude beside her paintings and "acting out" the poses of her female subjects—a prescient postmodern gesture of hyperbolic mimicry that was viewed at the time as frivolous exhibitionism. Yet, despite critics being more interested in viewing her physique than her art, Boty was committed to using her body as an aesthetic tool, for pleasurable self-expression as well as mimetic subversion. Evidently she recognized the problematic ubiquity of the female nude, as her two-part painting It's a Man's World I and It's a Man's World II (1963–65) shows. The work juxtaposes important male public figures of the century on one panel—Elvis, the Beatles, JFK, Cassius Clay, bullfighter El Cordobes and Lenin—with female models (some of them headless) from contemporary girly magazines, montaged against a bucolic backdrop that anticipates Barbara Kruger's protest "We won't play nature to your culture." Completed a year before Boty died, the piece contrasts her lighter, earlier efforts and shows her clear-eyed understanding of the gap between political and sexual representation.

Olowska tries to settle historical scores on Boty's behalf. Alongside a reproduction of the notorious newspaper article for which Boty posed naked with her artworks, she depicts the smiling artist pulling her shirt above her head. Another female figure—a bob-haired painter in a snazzy zebra-print dress, leopard-print shoes and a painter's apron-stands at an easel, brush in hand. While resembling Olowska, this second woman in fact comes from an issue of Art in America from the 80s. This was, of course, a time of unprecedented prominence for feminist artists in New York's art world, a reference that the pasted-in backdrop of the Manhattan nocturnal skyline reinforces. Yet where the discourse of 80s feminists tried to deconstruct women's place in the patriarchal order, ignoring or denying the pleasurable aspects of female self-display, Olowska makes room for both. By isolating Boty's prescient, exhibitionist gestures, and imagining her viewer not as a sleazy tabloid reader but as another female artist, Olowska implies that the ability for women to delight both in painting and posing, and in seeing and being seen, is one of feminism's hard-won goals.

Pauline Boty Acts Out One of Her Paintings For a Popular Newspaper and the other eight large works in Olowska's 2006 exhibition, Hello to You Too, share the same size and vertical orientation, each centring on a female figure that Olowska copied or collaged from magazines and other printed media. Tightly grouped, with one painting doubling as an exhibition announcement (including the dates, "8th February – until International Women's Day," and the opening reception dress code, "Avant-garde Costumes necessary"), the works had the feel of weathered billboards. These "distressed" yet appealing images of glamorous modern women energetically greeting femalecentred futures recalls the suffragettes' use of pictures of actresses and activists as "ads" for female emancipation. The wish-fulfilling aspect of this project—the idea that to fulfil your desire you have to act out and publicize itunderpins the performative nature of Olowska's work. The title of Olowska's exhibition, Hello to You Too, with its ring of sexual innuendo, suggests women hailing one another across generations. Instead of presenting feminists from different periods battling out their ideological and aesthetic differences, as most chronicles of the movement have done, Olowska creates a utopian environment wherein formerly antagonistic positions are acknowledged and Boty is recognized as an important figure then and an enabling presence today.

This investment in another woman as an ideal ego takes an even more mimetic turn in Olowska's work concerning Zofia Stryjenska. This Polish artist's career flourished between the world wars but declined under Communism when she wouldn't join the state-loyal Union of Artists—though the state still reproduced her works without paying or crediting her. The strong-willed Stryjenska passed as a man in order to study at the Munich Art Academy and raised her children on her own after her marriage collapsed. Olowska's affiliation both with Stryjenska's feisty spirit and her exuberant work in myriad media took the form of homage in a show that she organized for the 2008 Berlin Biennale.

Merging the role of artist and curator, Olowska revisited Stryjenska's 1925 Parisienne debut at the Exposition International des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes, from which she copied six large panels celebrating country life and the seasons. Yet where contemporary accounts comment on the vivid colours of Stryjenska's paintings, Olowska's monochromatic remakes reflect the fact that her only source was black-and-white photographic documentation. However, the colour and texture of Stryjenska's personality was evoked in entries from her diary, which Olowska reproduced in the exhibition catalogue, as well as through portraits, including photographs taken at the time of the opening and also a self-portrait Stryjenska painted in later life. Placing this latter work to the side of the installation, Olowska introduced the idea of the artist reviewing her career and its early, unfulfilled promise. The literary critic Gary Saul Morson refers to such strategies as "sideshadowing," which he contrasts with the literary device of "foreshadowing." Where foreshadowing suggests that historical events are inevitable, sideshadowing implies that things might have turned out differently, and that the past contains the seeds of untold "might-have-beens" or "might-bes."5

Shifting from Olowska's sisterly embrace, the German artist Susanne M. Winterling fixates similarly on enabling figures, gestures and projects from the modernist, female-centred past—but with an overtly erotic charge and more self-consciously autobiographical intent. Like Olowska, Winterling frequently depicts women who share her physical characteristics. Again we see the bob-haired modern woman who dresses dramatically. But rather than the glamorous femmes in Olowska's pictures, Win-

terling favours the cross-dressing androgyne. In Eileen Gray, the jewel and troubled water (2008), Winterling channels one such shorthaired garçonne, an Irish furniture designer, lacquer artist and architect known in Left Bank Paris for her lesbian liaisons (though she did marry a man). Her villa on the French Riviera, named E-1027, which she built in 1929, challenged Le Corbusier's ideas that "the house is a machine to live in" and was designed in relation to the shifting angles of the sun, the wind and the site's physical attributes. Gray also did not share her modernist architectural colleagues' obsession with open spaces, but introduced mobile shutters into her villa that combined privacy and intimacy with fluidity. Despite its implied critique of austere modernism, her building so impressed Le Corbusier that, after she left, he moved in—ultimately suffering a fatal heart attack while swimming in a nearby bay. Yet Le Corbusier's regard for E-1027 took a strange turn in 1938 when he decorated it with lurid, sexually graphic murals that Gray interpreted as an act of violence, and subsequently erected three structures near the house that destroyed her cherished privacy.

Winterling's Gray-inspired exhibition (which was included in When things cast no shadow, the 5th Berlin Biennale, which also featured Olowska's Stryjenska-focused project) took place inside another classic modernist edifice: Mies van der Rohe's Neue Nationalgalerie. Within two matching wood-panelled coat-check rooms, Winterling created symmetrical installations that each included spot-lit photographs of Gray, a maquette of a reflecting pool and a 16mm film projection of a window on which drops of water reflected diffuse, coloured lights. The film depicted the window inside the Nationalgalerie and, as such, remarked elliptically on the disregard for the natural elements that led (and still lead) to faulty engineering in many modern glass buildings. Implying a contrast to Gray's environmentally responsive designs, the glass becomes a skin or membrane that suggests that relations between inside and outside, self and other can be pleasurably reciprocal rather than invasively antagonistic.

Josef Strau describes Winterling's affiliations with other female artists and their social and professional crises, as "cross-fades of identity." Aptly, this term references both Winterling's understanding of subjectivity as porous and her use of "dated" techniques like cross-dissolves and multiple exposures. The appropriately titled 2006 exhibition I'll be your mirror, but i'll dissolve... includes the video projection Piles of Shade (2006) of fluorescent-toned multiple exposures of Winter-

⁵ Gary Saul Morson, Narrative and Freedom: The Shadows of Time (New Haven: Yale UP, 1994).

⁶ Josef Strau, "Susanne Winterling" trans. Richard Watts, *Camera Austria* 105 (2009), 20.

- 7 Claude Cahun, Les Jeux uraniens (manuscript, c. 1914, Jersey Museum archives) quoted by Whitney Chadwick and Tirza True Latimer in "Becoming Modern," The Modern Woman Revisited: Paris Between the Wars, eds. Chadwick, Whitney and Latimer, Tirza True (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers UP, 2003), 19.
- 8 Elizabeth Freeman, "Time Binds, or, Erotohistoriography," Social Text, Vol. 23, Nos. 3-4 (Fall-Winter 2005), 84-85.

ling, the actress Tilda Swinton and the singer Brigitte Fontaine. It calls to mind Claude Cahun's exploration of likeness as inherent to lesbian relationships that exceed familial structures: "Friend, you and I, who do not bear the same name, resemble each other like a pair of synonyms... yet it is the spirit, not the letter, that gives us the same meaning."7 In the same exhibition, the projected video Le Sens Pratique (2005) inspects tropes of doubling and repetition to explore how we define ourselves both relative to other people and through dress. Two young women with cropped dark hair and dark clothes pass a large Burberry raincoat back and forth, draping it over each other's shoulders. The coat gives temporary form to their silhouetted bodies, which otherwise vanish into the dark background. After one slips on and buttons up the coat, but before swapping it, the women pause and exchange a calm gaze as if acknowledging one another's sameness and emergence.

These objects from the feminine realm of dress, domesticity and the decorative arts in Winterling's art often have a biographical subtext. The video projection Untitled (Play, Winterling) (2007) shows another dark-haired androgyne, dressed dandily in black with a stiff white collar and cuffs, playing the violin. While the title might indicate that the musician and the artist are the same, in fact it refers to the Winterling violin once made by a branch of the artist's family. Its discordant notes distance us from this erotic notion of one woman playing another. Similarly, the goldrimmed porcelain cup that is twirled around by a white, pearl-buttoned kid-gloved hand in the 16mm film Untitled (cupstairspearls) (2008) also has family associations: the china was made by Winterling Porcelain Factories, before it went bust, and bears the Winterling name on its base. Violins, cups and gloves have corporeal connotations, "performing" almost as models on a stage as well as linking the bodies—past, present, and future—that use them, and connecting Winterling's autobiography to an imagined collective history. These objects have class connotations, too. Suggesting that Winterling comes from the kind of privileged background that enabled wealthy fin-de-siècle women like Gray to pursue lives of sexual, social and creative independence, these objects hint at nostalgia for a time before our homogenizing contemporary climate of gay marriage, when lesbianism still carried the whiff of glamour and scandal. By teasing out the queer undercurrents in her family history, and by isolating fleeting gestures and intimate artifacts under what she calls "a sensual spotlight," Winterling implies that minor moments and sensations deserve to be chronicled. Her art resonates with the cultural critic Elizabeth Freeman's focus on alternative timelines that chart the course of atypical queer life cycles. "Some events count as historically significant, some don't; some are choreographed as such from the first instance and thereby overtake others. Most intimately, some human experiences officially count as a life or one of its parts, and some don't," she notes. "Supposedly postimperial nation-states still track and manage their own denizens through an official time line, effectively shaping the contours of a meaningful life by registering some events like births, marriages, and deaths, and refusing to record others like initiations, friendships, and contact with the dead."8

A desire to be seen, coupled with an interest in *how* they are seen, unites the aforementioned women artists and is reflected in artworks that feature tropes of disappearance and illumination and a succession of looks sought, sent out and exchanged. Yet, as Michel Foucault famously argued, visibility comes at a cost, especially for marginalized social groups, who risk attracting unwanted attention, surveillance, categorization and control. These dangers have been particularly acute for women who have been both overlooked and looked at too much.

Dutch artist Manon de Boer explores the implications of excessive visibility for women. Her biographical films Sylvia Kristel: Paris (2003) and Resonating Surfaces (2005) belong to a planned trilogy about creative women who came of age during the sexually and culturally experimental late 60s and early 70s (the third, as-yet-unfinished work will focus on the American percussionist Robyn Schulkowsky). In different ways, the subjects of these films— Sylvia Kristel, the Dutch star of the soft core Emmanuelle films, and Suely Rolnik, a Brazilian psychoanalyst—suffer by being reduced to an image. In Kristel's case, it's sexual; in Rolnik's case, it's political. In both instances, De Boer aims to free Kristel and Rolnik from fixed historical representations by showing them in the process of recounting their memories while exploring memory as fluid and time-based. She also departs from art and cinema's traditional reliance on visual representations of women to create a complex palimpsest of images, voice and sound that keep the viewer at a critical distance. Although Kristel and Rolnik's monologues anchor these works, we see neither woman saying the words that we hear, and the images and sounds that we do encounter exist as autonomous, disjunctive layers.

Sylvia Kristel: Paris, which focuses on the actress' move to Paris to star in the *Emmanuelle*





PAGES 37 & 38

Zofia Stryjeńska,
Collaged Stryjeńska,
2008, curated by Paulina Olowska (paintings,
posters, illustrations,
and documents by
and about Zofia
Stryjeńska, with floorpiece and paintings
by Paulina Olowska),
installation view of the
5th Berlin Biennial for
Contemporary Art at

im Schinkel

9 Christy Lange, "Manon de Boer: Focus," Frieze, Issue 100 (June-August 2006). films ("no French actress dared to play a role like that"), is divided in half, with Kristel recounting the same part of her life in each. The interviews were recorded almost a year apart: the first monologue that we hear was taped after the second more detailed but less revealing version. So our experience of memory as temporal is woven into the film's fabric. Both parts begin and end with Kristel in a garden, poised and rather austere in red lipstick and nails, turning to face the camera and smoking a cigarette. She does not reappear until each section's end. Instead, we see Super 8 footage of Paris streets, buildings and parks, a mixture of slow pans and street-level shots. Frequently out of focus and overexposed, the footage has a home-movie quality that feels almost contemporaneous with the time that Kristel is recalling. A note of ironic distance characterizes Kristel's recollections, a lightness that differs both from her sculpted appearance and from her hyper-sexual celebrity persona. She speaks of herself as someone without a will, who has allowed herself to be seduced and directed by one "charming" man after another. Of the actor Ian McShane she says, "He treated me like someone who didn't know anything, and that fascinated me."

Paris is also the centre of action in Resonating Surfaces and—like the Dutch Kristel—the Brazilian Rolnik speaks French when recounting her time spent there. The film presents Rolnik's memories of her imprisonment for anti-dictatorship activities in Brazil, her trauma at being publicly branded, and her subsequent exile to Paris, where she studied and became intimate with Gilles Deleuze and was Félix Guattari's analysand. Like Sylvia Kristel: Paris, the film explores a woman who defines herself in relation to other people again mostly men—and traces her struggle for self-definition. Here, however, Rolnik's responsive nature emerges as an affirmative trait—a fluid subjectivity with the potential to expand through its encounters with people and events. Resonating Surfaces also privileges Rolnik's voice over her physical depiction and prevents the viewer from having too easy access to her image. We see Rolnik talking, smoking, reading a letter, but the footage is initially underexposed, brightening as her voice becomes stronger and other people's voices recede—emerging gradually, as Christy Lange says, like a photograph in a dark room.9 Rolnik does not appear in Resonating Surfaces until several minutes in, and the first few seconds depict "nothing:" the white, grainy space of scratched celluloid. We then hear two operatic screams—cries of death, of Maria in Wozzeck and Lulu in the eponymous work. Alban Berg's operas emerge later in the film when Deleuze plays them for Rolnik as examples of two ways of facing mortality. Maria's final dying cries are weak and submissive; she has accepted the end. But as Lulu faces her killer she emits the defiant scream of a woman who wants to live. The significance of these differing attitudes for Rolnik becomes clear later in a singing class. Responding to her teacher's suggestion that she practise a song from Brazil, Rolnik sings a number by the Tropicalismo star Gal Costa. The experience of singing in her mother tongue connects her to suppressed memories of Brazil and "penetrates" her body. Like a protective plaster, and echoed in the white dungarees that she has worn since moving to Paris, Rolnik realizes that the French language has protected her Brazilian-inflicted wound while preventing it from healing, and that she is ready to return to Brazil.

Although less obviously mirror images for the artist than Stryjenska is for Olowska or Gray is for Winterling, parallels between de Boer and her subjects exist. Like Kristel and Rolnik, de Boer left her home (the Netherlands) to live in a French-speaking city (Brussels) and she has discussed how this transition forced her to confront herself and her commitment to art-making. Like the other artists already discussed, de Boer attempts to "see" her female subjects, to understand them through close listening and observation, while respecting their fluidity and refusing to pin them down. This view of the other as a mirror for ourselves expresses our basic need for mutual recognition. It evokes Benedict Anderson's concept of "imagined communities" as collective identities that derive less from geographical proximity than from shared values and points of reference.

Anderson's arguments, published in 1984, became even more relevant with the advent of the Internet and the proliferation of virtual communities and online connections that do not require physical proximity. Together with the previously suppressed records that emerged after the collapse of Communism, the Internet is a central cause of the "archive fever" that has infected the art world recently. Not only has the Web given people access to vast sources of information, but it has also allowed them to interact with and develop their own archives. The impact of such a flourishing of research has been keenly felt in feminist and queer circles. Thirty years ago, the paucity of historical evidence about women and gays, and the invisibility of role models and precedents, was widely lamented. This sense of deprivation recently has given way to a spirit of optimism in the light of the historical material that has



Susanne M. Winterling, Untitled (cupstairspearls), 2008, 16 mm film loop, 1m:15s IMAGE COURTESY OF DANIEL REICH GALLERY, NEW YORK

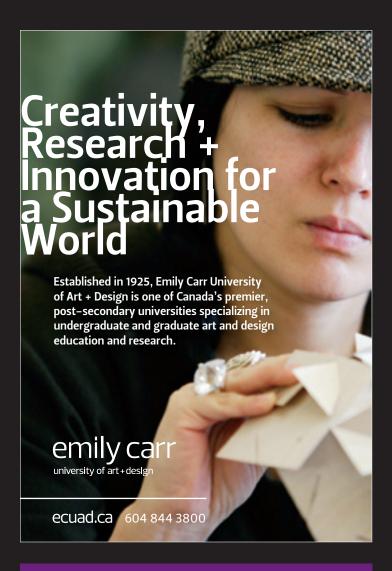
10 Terry Castle, The Literature of Leshianism: A Historical Anthology from Aristo to Stonewall (New York: Columbia UP, 2003), 47. emerged. Moreover, bringing their feminist and queer eyes to mainstream sources, artists and researchers are also revealing unacknowledged erotic dimensions within mainstream records.

In her 2003 anthology *The Literature of Lesbianism*, Terry Castle strays widely from the brief of "writing by lesbians." Voraciously sampling everything from *Book of Ruth* to Shakespeare's ballads, Gertrude Stein to lesbian blues songs, Castle presents romantic love between women as an enduring literary theme, noting, "The story I have sought to tell is one of abundance rather than scarcity." ¹⁰

Simultaneously, and responding to the prevalence of virtual relations and archival study, forms of liveness and embodiment have gained renewed prominence in the art world. While they all prioritize physical and tactile approaches to biography, the artists discussed here do so in quite different ways. Rönicke and de Boer restore richness and complexity to the lives of women that have been erased,

reduced, or stereotyped, while Olowska and Winterling enact a more intense identification with their subjects that suggests the desire both to possess and to fuse with them. But all four position themselves as students of their adopted mentors, hinting at the libidinal dynamics within pedagogical relations and the embodied nature of learning and understanding. By revisiting the female past for "mighthave-beens" or "might-bes," they show that, far from passé, the work of these once-innovative women still brims with potential. ◆

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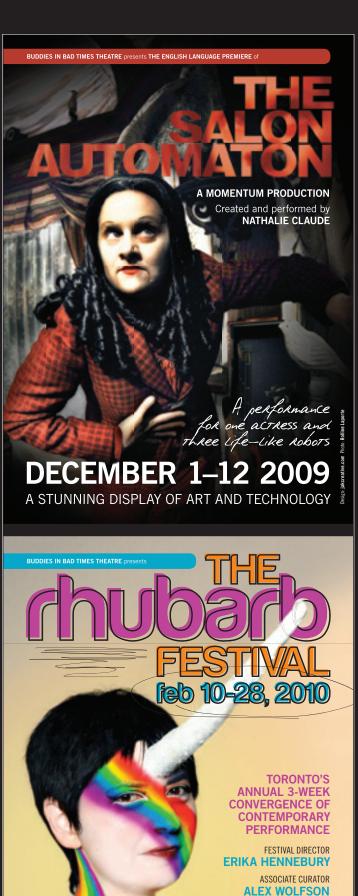
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