

BORDER STITCHING

Vessna Perunovich

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Vessna Perunovich: as our bodies remember...

... there is no inner man, man is in the world, and only in the world does he know himself. – Merleau-Ponty

How does a body remember? As Maurice Merleau-Ponty tells us, a body remembers via its *being* in the world, or through one's *inhabiting* of the world.¹ Memories surface as they are collected through our bodies. Vessna Perunovich's work could be described as a series of aesthetic attempts to make visible the moment of surfacing of the body's memories, shaped by their interactions with the outside—with the world of social, political, cultural, and other networks. Perhaps this is why Perunovich's leitmotif is a line and a net, as she exposes invisible relationships of the body to its surrounding. What results is an aesthetics of affect.

Vessna Perunovich's work produces the affective by constantly bringing to bear her own position on the borders of identity in its multiple formations (social, political, personal, cultural and so on). Born and educated in Serbia, Perunovich moved to Canada in the late 1980s where she pursued her artistic practice. Her work often reflects the multifaceted nature of her diasporic existence; it is interdisciplinary, performative, and often transitory in form and content. The artist's body and her personal experiences are always the point of departure for an aesthetics that operates intuitively, exacting a particular kind of attention from the viewer, an attention *of* and *to* the body (one's body experiences the work before the mind has had a chance to process it). The term that perhaps best describes this bodily encounter between the viewer and the work is *strangely familiar* (probably attributable to the artist's early contacts with surrealism). The affect, or the feeling of something being strangely familiar, is produced in Perunovich's installations, sculptures, drawings and other actions through a number of "non-representational signs" that deal with the aesthetic form (textures, sizes, cropped images, movement, viewpoints, colours, and so on.)² The viewer encounters these non-representational signs, as theorist Richard Dyer argues, on the level of structuration, not signification.³ In other words, the non-representational sign moves us, but very often we are not sure why.

Perunovich's multidisciplinary, multisensory approach to art-making produces affect when we are confronted with the supple, seductive nature of the gestures and materials she uses. From the sculptural installations of the 1990s, such as *Antipodes* (1997) and *Virgin White* (1997), to works such as *Towers of Belief* (2005), performances such as *I Hug the World and the World Hugs Me Back* (2003) and more recently *Unoccupied New York* (2013), she has carefully designed a structure of the senses in which the viewer is enticed by the texture and feeling of the materials used (nails, thread, nylon stockings, ropes, pigments, etc.), by their sensuousness, beauty, and sometimes implied danger. The constructed objects are organic in shape and rich in texture, at times made out of fabric and pierced through by sharp metal pieces and wire—wounded by the artist pushing the limits of the material. In the case of *Decoding Script* (2006), a video shows the artist methodically puncturing the delicate surface of a book's empty pages. Perunovich's actions are machine-like (the artist's hands literally work as fast as a machine) but loving—the close-up of her hands at work makes us realize how delicate her movements are. These gestures are also

both painful (the pages are reminiscent of human skin) and meaningful as we become aware of the book as an ideological object, or an object that contains ideology, here literally excavated, gauged out. The play between hard and soft is a potent aesthetic device as it speaks to the fragile nature of our skin, meant to provide protection and yet so easily torn up. As viewers, we react to her actions not only because she manages to make us care about the objects but also because those objects stand in for bodies that are bent, in pain, or simply stretched to their limit. This visceral reaction, the unwilling response to the physicality of Perunovich's installations, is what ultimately connects the intimate and the public, the personal and the political. As an artist who cares deeply about gender, identity, displacement, ideology, Perunovich leads us to such issues by offering herself as a primary guide.

Perunovich also constructs installations that viewers can physically enter, surrendering to the work. For instance, in *Open Ended* (2010–13) the limits of the body, its continuous imbrication in the matrices of power, surveillance, repetition, and submission are enacted through building a cage-like spiral structure, at the centre of which is a video of the artist walking in the snow; her footsteps retrace the spiral form of the cage. The repetitive gesture through which she directs the viewer to enter the cage repeats her own motion of drawing the spiral with her body. This effect of doubling is important because as viewers we become directly implicated in the meaning of the work. We are reminded of the limits of our own bodies as we are entrapped by the metal structure surrounding us; we are also reminded of our inability to move beyond barriers imposed by spaces, institutions, ideologies, or the body's own failures. The politics of movement, speech, and action concerns not only the artist but also us.

In the documentation of her most recent performance work, *Unoccupied New York* (2013), we see a person (we suspect it's the artist herself) shot from behind and carrying a mattress on her back. The white mattress is front and centre with the artist's feet and fingers appearing on its margins. She walks over bridges and in the middle of the street, passing people, cars, and buildings. In all the hustle and bustle of the city, the artist's simple gesture is both highly visible and oddly unnoticed (it is New York after all). The artist's ceaseless walk signals the inability to find rest, refuge, or home; exile and borders are her faithful companions. Many of Perunovich's

more recent works are dedicated to the politics of movement, remembering, and negotiation of the language of exile, and this particular performance poignantly speaks to these issues. A kind of longing for home and the negotiation of its dissipation are both embedded in the artist's performance. I am mostly reminded of the former socialist Yugoslavia (where Perunovich was born) that was dismembered in the 1990s. The languages of politics and culture—between her current home (Canada) and her former home (Serbia/Yugoslavia)—are in tension, which becomes obvious as she struggles to carry this everyday object. Negotiation of political, ethical, cultural, and other structures is done by making viewers aware of the entrapments that such structures impose on our identities. How our bodies remember, and how we resist, reconcile, or negotiate is what Perunovich's work makes visible.

Note: I would like to thank Vessna Perunovich for her wonderful work that inspired me, and Lin Gibson for her thoughtful editing of this text.

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1. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005): xxii.
2. Richard Dyer, "Entertainment and Utopia", in *Only Entertainment*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1992): 19.
3. *Ibid.*

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