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Ann Cooper Albright, *Traces of Light: Absence and Presence in the Work of Loïe Fuller*. Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2007. xvi + 229 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$ 75.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-8195-6842-7; \$ 27.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 0-8195-6843-0.

Rhonda Garelick, *Electric Salome: Loïe Fuller's Performance of Modernism*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007. xiv + 246 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$ 35.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-691-01708-2.

Review by Lucia Ruprecht, Emmanuel College, University of Cambridge.

Compared to other female pioneers of modern dance, Loïe Fuller has received surprisingly little attention in the form of monographs solely dedicated to her work, although she is commonly celebrated as the first one to bring this new art form to the stages of Europe. Two substantial books published in 2007 by American scholars have now helped to correct that imbalance. Both not only bring to light fascinating archival material, but also engage with the complexity of Loïe Fuller's art. 'La Loïe' managed to keep Paris enthralled for more than thirty years after her debut in 1892, yet she was deprived of lasting fame. In contrast to her younger rival Isadora Duncan, whose career in Europe she launched, Fuller did not bequest a comparable school or specific technique of dance, and quickly faded from popular consciousness after her death in 1928.

Her metamorphosing dances made Fuller the perfect embodiment of Art Nouveau. Yet her apparent dissolution behind the endlessly changing lines and curves of metres of silk, coloured by an elaborate lighting regime, turned her into a performer exceedingly difficult to pin down. She was a dancer who did not show her body; a star who carefully cultivated the most unglamorous private persona; a lesbian who managed to keep away sensationalist publicity from her long-term cohabitation with her partner and collaborator Gabrielle Bloch (stage name Gab Sorère); a female performer who also acted as impresario for other artists, and ventured into such 'male fields as stage design, mechanical invention, and filmmaking' (Garelick, p. 8); a woman born in America but made in Paris, as she famously said of herself, who attracted the intellectual elite to vaudeville venues, and held close friendships with people such as Rodin and Pierre and Marie Curie. What dance scholarship seems to agree upon is her status as 'founding mother of a century of modernism' (Garelick, p. 15), normally seen as a direct repercussion of her revolutionary break with the formal corset of classical ballet by way of synaesthetic spectacle instead of within the groundbreaking developments in modern movement technique. While both Garelick and Cooper Albright continue to elucidate Fuller's modernism, they do challenge the above-stated claims along with others that have become ingrained in scholarly discourse. The dancer's alleged denial of the classical tradition and her supposedly alien position within modern dance are among the assumptions that Garelick re-investigates. Cooper Albright's declared interest is an exploration of the 'physical experience of Fuller's dancing body', and her 'specific movement vocabulary' (p. xv), before turning towards other aspects of her art and impact.

Two books on the same topic appearing at the same time can be a blessing or a curse for authors and readers alike. After reading the studies in close succession, however, I enjoyed the important ways in which the two contributions complement each other. There is, no doubt, some overlap, if only in the repetition of facts about Fuller's career. Where they diverge is in academic approaches, and each author displays respective strengths and weaknesses. Garelick's scholarly discourse tends to efface the physical

event of Fuller's dance, as far as it could possibly be reconstructed. For some readers, the vocabulary of Cooper Albright's sympathetic account of the dancer's work may remain too personal. For example 'absence' and 'presence', the two terms of her subtitle, remain fairly implicit throughout the discussion, without at least some reference to their theoretical discussion that has recently emerged in dance studies.<sup>[1]</sup> But let me begin with the most intriguing effect of the conversation between the two books (a conversation that did not seem to have happened to any substantial degree during the authors' respective writing processes; Cooper Albright sometimes briefly engages with Garelick's previous work on Loïe Fuller, Garelick does not acknowledge Cooper Albright's ongoing project). As mentioned above, it is the initial motivation of the authors that differs: Garelick, a professor of French, writes a revisionist academic account of the artist from a literary scholar's point of view, while professor of dance, performer and choreographer Cooper Albright starts her book from a perspective that is shaped by her own practical insights. She does so by re-staging and performing Fuller's legacy, and using this experience to try to slip into Fuller's skin, to some extent, in order to gauge the physical effort and skill involved in dances that were documented as originating in an impersonal flow of energy rather than a performer's body. Cooper Albright thus succeeds in making a convincing case for the strenuous and skilful physical technique behind the spectacle, and for the strength and discipline of Fuller's body (which was never taken to suggest a dancer's anatomy because it did not correspond to expected physical codes).

Garelick organises her book into five chapters, starting with a general introduction to the characteristic aspects of Fuller's performance aesthetics and moving on to a rich chapter on Fuller's role at the Paris World's Fair of 1900. Chapters three and four investigate the continuities, instead of the more commonly acknowledged ruptures, within her work, drawing connections between Romantic ballet and modern dance, situating the artist between a literal rendering of Romantic disembodiment (she becomes, rather than gestures, towards images like butterfly or flower) and a female exploration of the organic in both body and nature that can also be found in the work of Martha Graham. Chapter four also engages with Fuller's group choreography that gradually replaced her solo performances. A short concluding chapter places Fuller's dance in relation to modernist drama, and a brief afterword sheds light onto contemporary traces of her performances.

Cooper Albright begins in a different manner, with an extended methodological introduction that engages with her own kinaesthetic approach to historical material, carefully stating the inevitable gap between the contemporary scholar's desire to come close to past events, and the events' unavoidable otherness. More programmatically than Garelick, she distinguishes between the various layers of her enquiry: physical labour, artistic production, discursive and pictorial reception, and academic investigation. Chapter one engages with Fuller's movement technique, particularly with its emphasis on flow instead of pose. She incorporates a rereading of Mallarmé's famous essay on the dancer, looking at 'the signature' (p. 11) of Fuller's movement, without fundamentally questioning whether terms related to 'writing' might be adequate at all for the artist's performances. Chapter two concentrates on Fuller's lighting technique, the historical exploration again informed by the author's own experiments with these techniques. The next chapter is fully devoted to the *Exposition Universelle* of 1900, yet in a less detailed and multi-faceted manner than in Garelick's book. Chapter four focuses on Fuller's Salomé performances. Chapter five expands and contextualizes the material, much like Garelick on drama, yet chooses a different path by comparing autobiographies and performance work of three other women who can all be related to Fuller; Colette, Eva Palmer, and Isadora Duncan. Cooper Albright's final chapter explores the trajectory taken by the integration of dance and technology from the early twentieth century up to such contemporary digital achievements like Ghostcatching (a method to render visible the traces of the moving body).

The authors' explorations of Fuller's status at the *Exposition Universelle*, to single out one example, serve an interesting comparison between the two approaches. While the reader enjoys jumping from Garelick to Cooper Albright in order to learn more about the actual historical and experiential materiality of the

event on stage, in Garelick she finds answers to questions that are hovering more vaguely in the dance scholar's account of the World's Fair. The chapter that engages with this milestone in Fuller's career in the context of French imperialist propaganda bears many of Garelick's strongest insights. It was at the Fair of 1900 that Fuller had her own theatre built; a statue of her not only adorned the entrance to her personal venue, but also the one to the performance space for other dancers, the *palais de la danse*, thus turning her vision into the vision of dance *per se*. Even more apposite at a Fair where glamour heavily relied on the celebration of the power of electricity was the performer's function not only as spirit of dance, but also as spirit of electricity, *la féé d'électricité*, enchanting her audience night after night with her spectacles of pure light and energy. These facts are well known, but Garelick's real contribution lies in her engagement with Fuller becoming an equally fitting 'projection screen' (p. 15) for France's imperialist concerns. The Fair, Garelick argues, catered for the voyeurism of its visitors by making visible the unseen, by staging colonialist scenes in which the French could catch glimpses of an orientalist fantasy of life in the colonies, but also by entertaining them with other, pseudo-scientific optical play, like a close-up view of the moon at a perceived distance of only four kilometres. Exactly that kind of optical play was at stake in Fuller's performances, with her projections of 'the surface of the moon, the interior of a cancer cell, the skeletons of fish' onto the fabric of her costumes (p. 84). Whether intentional or not, Fuller's inventions were in keeping with the economy of Imperialist desire at the Fair, with the message that 'geography is mutable, that vast distances can be shrunk' (p. 85). By analyzing Fuller's restaging of dances from her 1895 Salomé pantomime in this context, Garelick detects an overarching narrative of disavowal. Just as Fuller's early, chaste version of Salomé (she created another one in 1907) denied the bloody subtext of the tale, with St John's murder happening against Salomé's will, 'the Fair itself served as a Salome story for the public: transmitting a tale of bloody, murderous intention dissembled prettily with amusing performance' (p. 102). We are clearly in the middle of untying a potential and not necessarily conscious correlation between Fuller's Art Nouveau performances and a political agenda, which may have indeed influenced the extraordinary success of this American performer at a French Fair, up to her subliminal propagation of the United States as newly rising global imperialist power.

In Cooper Albright's terminology, Fuller would have thus participated in turning the Empire into an entertaining 'phantasmagoria'. Yet this is precisely what this author questions, concentrating much less on the colonial subtext than on the actual quality of the dances. To address the historical event as always already and, especially in retrospect, mediated by narratives, perceptions and representations, but also to respect the truth in these experiences and descriptions which are part of the meaning of the event, she turns to Patrice Higonnet's distinction between 'myth' and 'phantasmagoria': 'Whereas myths enable us to understand, phantasmagorias help us merely to deceive' (Higonnet quoted in Cooper Albright, p. 85). Fuller's dances, in her view, gained what Higonnet calls a mythical status in the midst of the phantasmagoria of the Fair, staging electricity not as an embellishing spotlight on a violent political project, but as an ever-changing life-force, generating 'a visual metaphor for a cyclical process of transformation' (Cooper Albright, p. 95) that was also at the heart of her movement and staging technique. This technique, coupled with Fuller's identity as American pioneer and self-made woman, Cooper Albright argues, was actually opposed to the aestheticised and the hystericised image of woman as passively symptomatic of both herself and the time, replacing it with a feminine aesthetic vision.

It is this feminine aesthetic vision as expressive of female sexuality that Cooper Albright focuses on in her reading of Fuller's more eroticised, violent second Salomé performance. Both authors challenge the allegedly asexual nature of Fuller's spectacles, a project in which they are influenced by and expanding on two primary approaches in pre-existing research, Tirza True Latimer's investigation of Fuller's lesbian identity, and Felicia McCarren's work on the dancer in the context of hysteria.[2] Garelick departs from the countless visual misrepresentations of the dancer's body shining through transparent gauze, in the shape of a young, slender girl. While Fuller did use see-through eroticism for her troupe of dancers, her solo spectacles used fabric as an opaque screen waiting to be sculpted by movement. The iconography around 'La Loïe' thus used conventional means to account for what was actually a

thoroughly unconventional vision of 'sexual interiority' (Garelick, p. 179) evoked by 'the most feminine and erotically available shapes' (p. 170) assembling and dissolving on stage, ranging from associations with genital openings and womb-like spaces to uncovered breasts and arched backs. Cooper Albright engages with Fuller's idiosyncratic eroticism through the one performance where the dancer actually unveiled, her Salomé production of 1907, teasing out the consciously performative, to some extent camp, aspects of this spectacle: 'By turns sexy and scary, menacing and pleading, Fuller enacts the gambit of classic feminine gestures. Yet I would argue that she foregrounds the performativity of this masquerade as well – not as parody or drag, but rather by making clear to her audience that she is taking on a dramatic role' (p. 130).

Both Ann Cooper Albright's and Rhonda Garelick's books are important contributions to a female artist, whose place on the agenda of French modernism is now less refutable than ever. Both authors have done much to shed further light on the sometimes counterintuitive complexity of this modernism. While both *Traces of Light* and *Electric Salome* deserve to be considered in their own right, they open an even more fascinating kaleidoscopic panorama when read in tandem.

#### NOTES

[1] See Gerald Siegmund, *Abwesenheit: Eine performative Ästhetik des Tanzes – William Forsythe, Jérôme Bel, Xavier Le Roy, Meg Stuart* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2006), and André Lepecki, ed., *Of the Presence of the Body: Essays on Dance and Performance Theory* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2004).

[2] See Tirza True Latimer, "Butch-Femme Fatal," in Juliette Willis, ed., *Proceedings of the Twenty-second Annual Society of Dance History Scholars Conference* (Stoughton: The Society, 1999), pp. 83-87, and Felicia McCarren, *Dance Pathologies: Performance, Poetics, Medicine* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

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