

Afterword

Thoughts on Contemporary Traces of Fuller

WHILE LOIE FULLER EFFECTIVELY VANISHED from our cultural radar after her death, traces of her spirit certainly remain.¹ We can find the most overt of these in the work of Jody Sperling, who openly incorporates recreations of Fuller's work into her own choreography (fig. A.1). Sperling describes her style as "nouveau-retro," and with her company Time Lapse Dance, brings classical and modern dance as well as acrobatics to her adaptations of Fuller. Using "magic lantern" projections, provided by Terry Borton, founder of the American Magic-Lantern Theater, Sperling recreates classic pieces by Fuller, including *Night, Fire*, and *Le Firmament*. Like Fuller, she projects slides of stars, flames, and flowers onto voluminous, glittering robes (fig. A.2). (Unlike Fuller, she displays balletic grace and often allows glimpses of her leotard-clad body beneath the veils.) Although one hundred years have passed, critics continue to thrill to this combination of fabric, music, and lights: "Encased in a silken costume," writes Jack Anderson, "Ms. Sperling summoned up spirits of earth, water, wind, fire, and ether by manipulating the fabric so its folds swirled, billowed, and soared in delightful metamorphoses."² Elizabeth Zimmer echoes these sentiments: "This postmodern choreographer-critic transforms . . . the spectacular work of modern-dance pioneer Loie Fuller into her own hypnotic spectacle."³

¹ Jennifer Tipton, for example, is an award-winning lighting designer whose work for ballet and modern dance companies is highly influenced by Fuller. "It is a wonderfully juicy thing to 'paint' with colored light," she has written (Jennifer Tipton, "Light, Like Music, Can Help Establish the Rhythm," *New York Times*, 26 January 2003).

² Jack Anderson, "An Evening of Solos with a Shimmering Tribute: Jody Sperling," *New York Times*, 27 March 2002, Arts section.

³ Elizabeth Zimmer, "Jody Sperling/Time Lapse Dance," *Village Voice*, 26 March 2002.



Figure A.1. Jody Sperling in *The Serpentine Dance*, photograph © Julie Lemberger



Figure A.2. Jody Sperling in "Ether" from *Dance of the Elements*, photograph © Julie Lemberger

Sperling has also created more postmodern dances that develop and render explicit some of Fuller's underlying thematic elements. In her witty duet *Cheaper*, for example, Sperling and another dancer (Ashley Sowell) perform tumbling gymnastics and yoga poses while "borrowing" each other's limbs. That is, they interweave their arms and legs in such a way that spectators, looking at a two-woman "handstand," for example, cannot discern whose legs are flying up into the air and whose arms are bearing their combined body weights. Costumed in horizontally striped cotton suits (a kind of cross between the "onesies" babies wear and cartoon prison garb), the dancers tumble and cavort like characters from a Buster Keaton movie, while occasionally moving through intimate, twisting embraces that suggest a lesbian erotics. In this way, *Cheaper* overtly develops a number of tacit themes in Fuller's work: the broad comedy of vaudeville and cabaret, the notion of "prosthethically" extending the capacity of a dancer's limbs (achieved here via the use of a second dancer's limbs rather than batons), and a subtle blend of childlike innocence (the women clown around with each other in their absurd costumes) and a woman-centered sexuality.

In her very thoughtful *Symptomatic*, Sperling again uses some other Fuller-esque techniques to draw out Fuller's frequent *mise-en-scène* of medical or scientific interiority. The piece is set in a doctor's office where a woman "patient" is to receive an onstage consultation with her physician. While a booming male voice from offstage asks questions about her health, the patient gazes at her own body, which begins to tremble with increasing violence. The dancer is unperturbed by the shaking, regarding her disobedient limbs with disinterested calm and clinical detachment. The "doctor" (played as a man but by a female dancer) then appears silhouetted behind a screen. His giant, shadowed "hand" then looms toward the patient to examine her. The patient's body responds to the outsized hand, writhing under its "touch," as a hypnotized subject might respond to the hypnotizer. The patient's relationship to the shadow hand also suggests that of a disconnected puppet still guided by a phantom version of its puppeteer's hand.

Here, of course, Sperling plays not only with Fuller's scientific and medical themes, but uses her *Ombres gigantesques* technique to investigate the relationship between doctor and patient, patient and patient's body, flesh and shadow, and ultimately, self and other. *Symptomatic* ends with Sperling's body gradually being overtaken completely by the shaking.

While there are other periodic recreations of Loie Fuller's dancing, most notably by German choreographer Brygida Ochaim, what interests me most in this *postscriptum* is an art form that has received virtually no critical attention but which clearly relies on the same powerful processes that drove Fuller's fame: I am referring to "flag dancing," or "flagging" (also known as "spinning linen," "rag dancing," and "fanning").

Although its official, scholarly history has yet to be written, flagging emerged in the gay nightclubs of Chicago and San Francisco, most likely in the late 1970s and early 1980s. At its most basic, it consists of groups of dancers (mostly but not all gay men) rhythmically waving large squares of weighted silk around their bodies, as lights dance over them. Often, the fabrics are tie-dyed in brilliant colors, which creates patterns that undulate wildly when agitated (fig. A.3).

While flagging styles and equipment vary, it seems that all dancers agree on one point: flagging has the capacity to provoke states of deep, hypnotic trance in participants and even in spectators. As the fabric whirls into the air—forming the same kind of ephemeral sculptural shapes that Fuller wielded so well—participants speak of feeling lifted out of their bodies and daily problems, finding normally inaccessible emotions and thoughts rising effortlessly to consciousness. Although the art form tends to be associated with the heavy use of "club drugs," including Ecstasy and crystal methamphetamine, the most