

BOOK REVIEWS

Reviewed by Jody Sperling

Ann Cooper Albright,
*Traces of Light: Absence and Presence in the
 Work of Loie Fuller*,
 Wesleyan University Press, 2007.

Rhonda K. Garelick, *Electric Salome: Loie
 Fuller's Performance of Modernism*, Princeton
 University Press, 2007.

During her lifetime, Loie Fuller (1862-1928) was one of the world's most celebrated performers. She enchanted audiences from the 1890s through the 1920s with her special brand of spectacles concocted from fabric, motion and light. She swirled her huge costumes—at times made from, literally, hundreds of yards of silk—into spiraling sculptural forms around her person. A stagecraft “wizardress,” she illuminated these forms with multi-colored lights and projected images. The results were ethereal, hypnotic and transforming. Writers observing her performances often described her presence as a “ghost,” a “fairy” or an “apparition.”

Fuller's legacy has been almost as ephemeral as her art. After her death, her reputation silently evaporated. She has been primarily remembered in dance history texts as a “precursor” to modern dance notables Isadora Duncan and Ruth St. Denis. She also survives in the countless Art Nouveau artifacts which reproduce her iconic image in various commo-

dified forms—posters, sculptures, lamps, bookends, and the like. Two new books aim to reinvigorate Fuller's legacy. Both also work to reinsert her physical presence into the discourse of her ghostly art.

Rhonda Garelick's *Electric Salome*, in particular, argues for Fuller's relevance beyond her status as modern-dance “pioneer” and traces the way in which her work was modernist in its own right. Like a tabula rasa, Fuller's white silks acted as a projection screen for the fantasies of her spectators. Garelick argues that this transference, in the psychoanalytic sense, gave Fuller's art the “uncanny capacity to absorb and reflect myriad aspects of artistic and cultural environment.”

In a fascinating and revelatory chapter on Fuller's presence at the Paris Exposition of 1900 (Fuller was the only performer there to have her own theater) shows how the threads of Orientalism and colonialism wove their way into Fuller's flowing fabrics. Part of what made Fuller's art “modernist,” was the way in which Fuller simultaneously embodied both the subject and landscape. Her costumes were so vast that, within the play of lights and projections, they became morphing geographies.

Like the imperialists promoting the Exposition, Fuller's art was associated with the advance of science and technology. In *Le Firmament*, Fuller projected photographic images of the moon onto the undulating surface of her silks. An-

other later work featured the patterned images of cancer cells blown up under a microscope. Using projections in this way Fuller collapsed spatial boundaries, between the macro and micro, between inner and outer worlds.

In Garelick's view, “[t]hat geogra-

phy is mutable, that vast distances can be shrunk (the moon can seem but a meter away), and that the self can be projected beyond its physical limits,” was an idea that implicitly served the Fair's imperialists aims. It's ironic to observe how the work of Fuller, an



American but one who made her reputation in Paris, subtly embodied both French art and politics.

If Garelick's book spirals out, teasing out connections with Fuller to broader movements of colonialism, as well as Romantic Ballet (in Chapter Three) and Modernist Drama (Chapter Five), Ann Cooper Albright's *Traces of Light* describes a more inward spiral. In her introduction, Cooper Albright fleshes out her own experience re-enacting Fuller-style dancing and how this informed her writing process:

Dancing amidst clouds of fabric in elaborate lighting effects, I try to understand something of Fuller's experience from the inside out. I also dance with words, moving with my writing to see how ideas resonate in my body. Then too, as I weave my way through archival materials and historical accounts of cultural milieus, I practice staying attentive to what I have learned through that dancing experience. (p.3)

The book is, partly, a personal meditation on the questions raised by trying to imagine Fuller's bodily presence. The writing itself wafts between an informal, almost colloquial, style, and a more theoretical lingo. The first chapter, traces the development of Fuller's movement vocabulary of serpentine swirls of fabric. Here, Cooper Albright ponders the physicality, and the erotics, of the

dancer who in the words of Stéphane Mallarmé "is not a woman dancing...is not a woman." How do you conjure up that sweating, breathing muscular being whose work it was to heft those huge costumes around? And especially, when that work was invisible beneath fluffy clouds of silk and lighting pyrotechnics.

One way is to try doing the work. Cooper Albright finds that by "playing with torque and momentum, and banking the fabric in ever larger loops," she herself had "the dual satisfaction that comes from both powering the roller coaster and getting a chance to ride it." (p. 30) It's interesting from my own vantage point-as a dancer-choreographer who has been performing Fuller-inspired dances for a decade-to follow Cooper Albright's associations. The way she describes counter-movements and dynamic spirals resonates, partially, with my own experience. The wonderful thing about Fuller's work is that with the simple elements of fabric and light, she was able to create so many qualities and impressions, all of them transformative.

And there are many ways to experience this work physically. In the introduction, Cooper Albright admits that she began her Fuller-esque movement experiments with a costume made from parachute material, not silk. Fuller herself always used silk and, usually, that of the very lightest weight. Personally, I can attest

that the entire kinesthetic experience of moving changes dramatically with the density of the fabric. With a heavier weave there is more torque, resistance and effort as part of the play. The lighter fabric, the more it seems to catch currents on its own and the effort is in the letting go. While Cooper Albright emphasizes the effort and dynamic power of the movements necessary to launch the fabric into crests- which I have certainly felt-I have also found satisfaction in a quivering lightness, in delicately teasing the silk into emanating ripples, and in a sense that the self dissolves into the space.

As the book unfolds, Cooper Albright does let her experience spin her into larger considerations. Like Garelick, she expounds on Fuller's presence at the Paris Exposition but also on her Salome performances, the most significant "failure" of Fuller's career. Cooper Albright also includes a chapter that treats Fuller's in relationship to three other contemporaries, Colette, Eva Palmer and Isadora Duncan.

Both Garelick's and Cooper Albright's books offer significant advances to Loie Fuller scholarship. And both argue persuasively for the importance of Fuller's legacy. There is definitely something in the air about Fuller-let's hope she lingers a little longer.

