

UNWRAPPING THE LEFTOVERS OF DESIRE

By Adrian Parr

It is not a question of experiencing desire as an internal lack, nor of delaying pleasure in order to produce a kind of externalizable surplus value, but instead of constituting an intensive body without organs, Tao, a field of immanence in which desire lacks nothing and therefore cannot be linked to any external or transcendent criterion.¹ Let us begin by imagining an open body, one that is transformational and pre-personal; a body produced through an alignment of desire; a body of desiring production whose intensities and flows continually reorganise the composition and position of that body: the body without organs (BwO). According to French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari the BwO is destratified, “supple, more molecular, and merely ordered” whereas an organism is “rigid, molar, and organised.”² Pre-personal desire, they contend, is a molecular movement of material transformation and although all molecular movements are real only some produce conscious effects in the form of perceptions. More importantly, pre-personal desire transforms and reconfigures individual and collective bodies on an unconscious level, but the character of that unconscious entails a process of repetition that produces variation. Therefore, rather than align desire within a familial triangle transcendently constituted on

¹ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Capitalism and Schizophrenia: A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi, 1st ed. 1980 (London: Athlone, 1999) 157.

² *Ibid.*, 41.

what that subject lacks, Deleuze and Guattari posit that desire aligns itself across a multitude of identificatory points—history, geography, races, groups, gender, family—that constitute an immanent plane of production. And it is this immanent process of creative production that shapes recent anti-monument works³ of Sydney based artist Julie Rrap. In effect what Rrap does is probe the problem of reproduction with processes of desiring production.

In an interview with Sam Schoenbaum, she explains her monuments make a mockery of the heroic that “invite the viewer to get down onto them in order to get into them.” Furthermore, she says, the viewer is required to “bend into a position not usually associated with looking at art” and maybe “here the viewer is looking for art.”⁴ Instead of inserting herself directly into tradition as she did in her earlier works, in *Declining Nude (leftovers)*⁵ she enters history in an ambiguous act of disappearance. Adopting the poses of figures in Manet’s *Luncheon on the Grass (Le Déjeuner sur l’herbe)*⁶ she uses her own body to create bronze residues of the points where Manet’s figures touch the ground. Forming a constellation in the grass by whimsically tossing European tradition out to pasture in the Australian landscape, Rrap subverts the dominant tradition

³ In particular *Monument 1, Monument 2, Monument 3*, 1995-6, fibreglass and bronze dust, camera and monitor, 148 x 80 x 20cms each installed at the Brisbane City Gallery, Brisbane, Australia.

⁴ Julie Rrap, ‘Interview with Sam Schoenbaum,’ in George Alexander and Catriona Moore, *Julie Rrap* (Sydney: Piper Press, 1998) 125.

⁵ Julie Rrap, *Declining Nudes (leftovers)*, 2001, installation of bronze body parts, installed for the Helen Lempriere National Sculpture Award, February 2002, Melbourne, Australia.

⁶ Édouard Manet, *Le Déjeuner sur l’herbe*, 1863, 82 x 104” (208 x 264cm). Musée d’Orsay, Paris.

of art history. With shiny clumps of brass cast from her buttocks, legs, heels, palms, and elbow, that reflect the sun and collect the rain, she brings the monumentality of tradition out in to the open enticing the viewer to mingle and inhabit the erotic zones of both the artist and history. Doing so, the viewer realises that Rrap has redistributed the majoritarian organisation (European artistic tradition, voyeuristic arrangement of the picture plane and its contents, visual privilege) quite differently: along minoritarian lines (Australian landscape, performance, and tactility).

Looking down onto the monument instead of up, the viewer is seduced into filling-in the tiny craters that simply intimate the unseen dimension of the work (the body in its entirety). Then, disturbed by our desire to distinguish between presence and absence, solid form and imagination we stroke and lower our body into Rrap's. Finding ourselves trying on her feet for size we suddenly realise that the privileged position of Manet's viewer has been inverted as we voluntarily enter the picture plane, uncovering the erotic dimension of Manet's little social gathering with the combination of our own bodies and the artist's. The sweat of another's palms or the remaining drops of rain inside bronze body hollows are suggestive of bodily fluids. Desire encircles the familial zones of Manet who had used his younger brother Éugene, brother-in-law Ferdinand Leenhoff, and favourite model Victorine Meurend. Moving in the excess of history new representational intensities are set in play as the viewer

breaks with Manet's two-dimensional frame to embody Rrap's bronze bodily residues; the creases of her skin, the intimacy of her erotic zones and even the memory of all who have inserted themselves here before. The two-dimensional experience of viewing is transformed into three-dimensional form. Then, opening up a fourth dimension the viewer snuggles into the sunken forms of the artist's body, all the while performing those selfsame poses of Manet and Rrap. As our backsides squeeze into Rrap's tiny body, we turn around to find the body part that best matches Manet's grouping, hitting and missing we discover we are in both Victorine's and Ferdinand's body, our twisted configuration distorting and confusing the frontal view of Manet's picture. Rrap's nakedness rubs over the viewer's body by rubbing out the formality inherent in the elegance and poise of Manet's group. By undermining the familiarity of habitual bodily experiences and perceptions, Rrap draws the viewer's attention to the active condition of desiring production; a body that produces itself otherwise in between the formal and informal.

Through corporal and conceptual interplay Rrap revitalises the experience and representation of femininity and history by working with the partial elements of art history's unconscious. Her body is an active force, producing a multitude of connections releasing alternative bodily articulations that she then invites the viewer to perform in their own way. For example, after having immersed parts of her body in plaster, she then

re-organised these with a variety of other substances – rubber, wax, extreme heat, and bronze – all of which marked moments of partial articulation distributing the coherency of her body through a variety of postures, gestures and intensities. In this way her work encompasses a desiring production whereby a multitude of different material flows unblock the stratified organisation of the female body as objectified nude in the history of art. In her collaboration with the master vision of art history she affirms the very conventions that have circumscribed and displaced the restricted value of women in art as either artist's model or muse, but she also reconnects these historical elements in unique ways so that new configurations are posed. Once Rrap opens the image and its history up to the unforeseen tendencies internal to them, she deterritorialises them, displacing the ground upon which both are conventionally understood. Utilising traces of the past to affirm the present, she destabilises the monumentality of the past making it co-exist otherwise in the present. Working with the reactive effects of patriarchal order that objectifies women, Rrap experiments with the reactive nature of those effects in order to reinvent new subjective possibilities for both men and women in fresh and sensual ways. Inevitably then, it is not just Rrap's body but also the viewer's that inhabits the world and its history differently.

Drawing attention to the male/female dichotomy that relegates the reproductive female body to the domestic sphere and the masculine mind

to that that of cultural production, Rrap does not erase the boundary that defines this dichotomy; rather she smudges it. The boundary of reproductive/productive, female/male enjoys a precarious existence at best: a quivering boundary that is visibly in a state of disappearance. The bodies of men and women are encouraged to inhabit space in a different way, the male body inserts itself into Rrap's female form whilst at the same time inserting itself into the history that privileges the male gaze and the production of culture. The viewer is required to play with various postural configurations in a corporal interplay and organisation (viewer's body, artist's body, historical body), so that their body is not simply implicated in an abstract system of signification but actively produces its own unique position that is at once individual and collective. Accordingly, thought, body, substance, and time combine in a process that blurs the male/female, productive/reproductive, public/private dichotomies invoking pre-personal ways of imagining and thinking about women and their bodies in relation to history and the public realm. Thus, her work is not consumed by history inasmuch as it moves through history playfully, critically reconceiving the individual bodies of the artist and viewer, as well as the collective body of materiality and change.

Conceived in terms of an intensifying capacity, pre-gendered (masculine and feminine) and pre-biological (male and female) desire dislodges the reproduction of normative meanings. Hitherto, desire encompasses an

aesthetic field that moves independently, forging new alliances, generating innovative points of reference and practices. This process may then entail an aesthetic pragmatics, a new way of working – not *for* but *through* convention – an alternative movement that is no longer concerned with rates of growth but existential enrichment. For example, as Rrap's *Declining Nude (leftovers)* suggest female specificity can be utilised in ways that confound and complicate readymade interpretation. She argues she is

more interested in releasing the audience's imagination by engaging the viewer in the construction and definition of the work. Objects and their sensations, touch for example, become of more interest as a field of inquiry. New materials bring with them new questions, new possibilities.⁷

In this respect she not only uses humor to playfully interrogate the authority of dominant representational systems, she also boisterously transforms humorous play with sardonic wit. Swinging a double-edged sword above our heads Rrap presents the viewer with traces of herself, but her traces take on a ghostly aura marking the Australian landscape with acts of disappearance. Haunting the terrain with its own problematic colonial history, Rrap penetrates the threshold between the foreign and familiar by occupying the unseen thefts that have scarred and violated Australia's communal landscape in a cloud of silence. What she leaves behind are exotic products that have been taken from the European

tradition and recontextualised in an-other environment. Rather than take an unfamiliar object that is then recontextualised in a new, albeit familiar setting, she unsettles this colonial paradigm by unwrapping Western culture in order to produce it otherwise. Rrap tampers with the discordant un-familiarity of European tradition by producing it as the exotic artefact and the object of Australian desire, the domain of pleasure and new cultural experiences.

⁷ Julie Rrap, 'Interview with Sam Schoenbaum', 125.