



ANN CARLSON + MARY ELLEN STROM
LINCOLN, MA

Choreography can be seen as an antithesis to authenticity even when its intention is to mimic the authentic. Movements are designed, gestures are manipulated, and outcomes are controlled. However, the emotive response of the viewer—though part of the choreography itself—is very genuine. *New Performance Video*, the first major museum exhibition by video artist and professor Mary Ellen Strom and choreographer and performer Ann Carlson, features a handful of performative videos that rely on choreography in several mild-to-wild circumstances [DeCordova Museum and Sculpture Park; January 24—May 17, 2009].

In *Four Parallel Lines*, 2007, four Guadalupe day laborers, casually dressed and wearing workmen's gloves, each drag a two-by-four piece of lumber through the black sands of a hilly beach. They walk backwards in unison, drawing four parallel lines in the dark shore. Filmed in a single real-time shot, the sandy marks are washed away in the last few seconds of the video by an electric-white, foamy tide—just as the men appear to fall out of the camera's view. Despite its haunting simplicity and serene setting, the work addresses the plight of immigrants. It is also possibly an ode to Walter de Maria's 1968 *Two Parallel Lines*, in which the artist drew two chalk lines across a two-mile stretch of the Mojave Desert. While references to shifting landscapes are obvious in both works, Carlson and Strom's *Four Parallel Lines* also subtly references racial and economic landscapes.

On an adjacent screen, *Sloss, Kerr, Rosenberg & Moore*, 2007, features four men of a different sort; suited lawyers in an elevator lobby performing a series of choreographed movements, in unison and at varying intervals. Quick, almost violent actions alternate with subtle gestures, as each dapper figure crouches, hops or raises his hands in the air with eyes shut. It's a bizarre and captivating spectacle—its absurdity due in part to the stature and composure we associate with the law profession. In a larger social context, viewers won't be terribly surprised to see Hispanic day laborers moving pieces of

wood, but the sight of businessmen flailing around erratically is immediately odd—stunning, in fact—and together the installations highlight notions of class.

If these works pose social questions, *Cuenta*, 2007, evokes a sort of portraiture. A handful of Guadalupe men chant and sing in an industrial building. The work seems to combine directed performance and improvisation, and includes everything from vocalized bomb sounds to the lyrics of the Guadalupe version of "Happy Birthday." *Cuenta*, the Spanish word for "account" or "story," denotes a narrative about the lives of these men. But "cuenta" is quite a loaded term in this context, as it is more commonly used to describe the cost of something, financial or otherwise. Here, choreography is nearly absent from the men's gestures and movements, but significantly present in the tonal abstractions and gun sounds they perform. This casts the performers as collaborators rather than subjects.

The same cannot be said, however, for the final two works in the show. *Meadowlark*, 2008, commissioned by the DeCordova Museum and Sculpture Park, is a six-channel installation that spreads the colorful expanse of the American West—resembling a Frederic Remington painting—across several screens around the circular room. Filmed at a reservation in Montana, a nude Ann Carlson is found lying in soil or running between screens, clockwise around the space. Screens fade to black consecutively, and bird-like echoes mingle with the sounds of rustling leaves. The whole thing feels remarkably staged, unlike the earlier works.

While a number of the works on view engage with specific social issues, none are more literal in their investigation than *Madame 710*, 2008. The three-channel installation features a nearly nude Carlson—wearing a clear plastic milkmaid dress filled with dollar bills—dancing around a cow in an art gallery. Inspired by Joseph Beuys' 1974 performance in which he lived in a gallery with a coyote for three days, *Madame 710* seems so rife that any subtlety is lost behind a terribly overwrought polemic.

Ultimately, however, it would be a mistake to think of Carlson and Strom's work as staged. In fact, much is well beyond captivating, as is the case with *Four Parallel Lines*, where the work simultaneously references art history and social issues. Their success as works of art, however, depends on their degree of reliance on choreography. Works that channel it too literally suffer for it. But when choreography is used to enhance rather than entertain, the results are anything but routine.

—Evan J. Garza

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Ann Carlson and Mary Ellen Strom, still from *Four Parallel Lines*, 2007, single-channel video, ed. of 7; still from *Madame 710*, 2008, three-channel video, ed. of 8 [courtesy of the artists, Judi Rotenberg Gallery, Boston, and Alexander Gray Associates, New York]