

# GIRL, INTERRUPTED

JOHANNA BURTON ON TRACY + THE PLASTICS

PERFORMANCE

IT WAS UNCLEAR just when the show officially started. Nikki was the first band member to arrive. While the audience got settled, she was busy alternately drinking from a teacup and attempting the apparently vexing art of getting both arms into her jacket. Eventually Tracy and Cola showed up, visibly peeved and wanting to know why Nikki had missed band practice earlier in the day. She'd been practicing, Nikki replied a little haughtily: busy "practicing drinking tea like a lesbian," "practicing putting on my coat like a lesbian," "practicing standing next to a stranger like a lesbian." The list went on, but Cola interrupted, wanting to work on a drum riff she felt hadn't been smoothed out. She demonstrated, making the movements and sounds of drumming, magically enough, without the physical presence of any drums. So the show went, with occasional interludes of gorgeous, punk-infused, lilting-vocals songs emerging amid the usually out-of-sync, comical, strange, and endearing dialogues between the band members (all three talking at once or nobody talking at all), keyboard and drum riffs, and, above all, abundant dead-air time.

This forty-five-minute set last February at the Kitchen in New York City had been billed as Tracy + the Plastics' first full-length performance and video installation—though, under more impromptu circumstances, the band had played myriad venues around the country, from universities to alternative music spaces, bedrooms to queer discos, as well as the 2004 Whitney Biennial. At the Kitchen, however, the band didn't simply arrive with its array of equipment, set up in situ, and then pull up stakes postshow. Instead, an unusual site-specific environment had been laboriously constructed for the band's three-night run, insisting on a kind of aggressively indeterminate spatial intimacy uncommon in public spaces.

Tracy + the Plastics collaborated on this structure with sculptor Fawn Krieger, hoping to conceive a performance space in keeping with the band's ideologies.



**FOR EVERY MINUTE OF MUSIC DURING THE KITCHEN SHOW THERE WERE ANOTHER FOUR ALLOCATED TO SOMETHING AKIN TO WAITING, TO THE BUZZ OF DEAD AIR. BUT EXACTLY WHO WAS WAITING, AND FOR WHAT?**

(What they had in mind: '70s consciousness-raising feminist groups holding meetings in dens as well as teenage punk bands practicing in basements.) The result: *ROOM*, 2005, a weird, cartoonlike rendering of the living room we all grew up in, complete with that carpet (scratchy but somehow comforting beige nylon pile), coaxed into swells that served as casual seating and bled indistinctly into the "stage" where Tracy and her sidekicks would perform. On entering *ROOM*, every visitor was asked to take off her shoes before settling in. Flintstone-esque foam spheres were scattered around the space, static body-size things that, like most everything else there, had no hard edges or ninety-degree angles (a choice described by the artists as embodying "nonhierarchical building" strategies). One of these forms served as a makeshift screen showing, at various points, projections of a black dog who emitted not barks but synthesized keyboard notes, or life-size, prerecorded shots of people, many of whom also happened to be sitting in the audience while the band played. Their images literally lifted and transplanted from periphery to center, these spectators were virtually inserted into the action—their behaviors of passively gazing, nervously

gesturing, and just plain doing nothing rendered weirdly riveting when projected next to and interpellated by the band's "live performance," as it were.

I give "live performance" the scare-quote treatment here because the line between the live and the, well, *not live* is more complicated with regard to a Tracy + the Plastics performance than simply positing mediated image against unmediated one (as if an unmediated image could exist anyway). To begin with, did I mention that all three members of this queer-punk-feminist-girl band are played—simultaneously—by one woman? And that this woman's name isn't Tracy but Wynne Greenwood, a twenty-seven-year-old who came of age in Washington State when (largely male-dominated) grunge was at its peak? Prerecording footage of herself as Nikki and Cola and then performing "live" as Tracy in front of and in dialogue with the other members' projected images, Greenwood makes her "band" a kind of lo-fi, split-personality hallucination. Indeed, Tracy (singer), Nikki (keyboard), and Cola (drums) are all only slightly modified renditions of Greenwood herself—less alter egos or highly evolved personae than seemingly playacted

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extensions whose strange brand of critical levity operates to question, affirm, and confuse both existential and constructed notions of "the self." Tracy looks, talks, and sings a whole lot like Wynne Greenwood; Nikki, who strikes impromptu poses (often involving a peace sign), puts forward a slightly more glam attitude, as her wig's dark brown tresses are longer and more coiffed than Tracy's real hair of the same color; Cola wears a weird, puffy platinum wig, self-consciously monitors her voice so that it's always an octave lower than the other band members', and likes to wear recognizably "lesbian" gear, like down vests. (She's the classic introvert, a soft butch, and Tracy is often coaxing single-word answers out of her.)

Even at the risk of giving Tracy + the Plastics' music—ostensibly what any band is all about—short shrift, I want to focus on the topic of dead air. One could go on and on (and many have) about whether Greenwood is more PJ than Patti, more Seattle than SoHo, but what fascinates me about her semi-fictional feminist troupe is how very often she lets space and time just sit there, how often she makes both available rather than filling them with songs. Having enough material is definitely not the issue: The band's second full-length CD, *Culture for Pigeon*, was released by Troubleman Unlimited in 2004, and is to say, quite simply: For every minute of music airing the Kitchen show there were another four allotted to something akin to waiting, to the buzz of dead air. But exactly who was waiting, and for what?

To Greenwood, who has thought a great deal about space—which bodies occupy it with ease and which are denied access—the notion of "dead air" is promising, offering an underutilized space likely available for clandestine inhabitation. Indeed, dead air in her hands should be renamed something like "live air," since engaging it necessarily changes its terms. ROOM was conceived in order to offer both audience and performer(s) a way to literally take up space, to potentially occupy real physical coordinates in a more conscious and symbolic way. Yet it's interesting to note how Greenwood has experimented with similar, if less literally translated, ideas in video—a medium she began using well before *Culture for Pigeon* + the Plastics. In fact, the concept she has developed with and employed most consistently in her work over the years is that of the "pause," which she theorizes as offering a kind of unexpected temporal equivalence to the more spatial "room." In her song "Can you pause that for a second . . . let yourself groove," published in a 2003 issue of the feminist journal *LITR*, Greenwood argues that while pausing a video is typically regarded as a temporary disengagement with what one is watching, this (injection on the contrary creates the space for rich real participation can happen, where passively viewing opens up to the possibility of agency. The regular flow of things is disrupted, and one can intentionally "edit" behaviors, question culture, or act otherwise predetermined actions.

In works done by Greenwood (as versions of "herself" other than Tracy et al.), she has pushed the promise of the pause in unexpected ways, recently in a fifteen-minute video work titled *Huge Days*, 2004, a piece that documents three female friends (yes, all played by Greenwood) passing time. It should be boring—a highlight is one character tapping her teeth with a Sharpie—but it's not; there's something so full to the emptiness of action that it's hard to look away. Recourse to the pause is also exemplified in two collaborations with artist KB Hardy that were recently shown at Reena Spaulings Fine Art in New York. *New Report*, 2005, is an experiment in what radical lesbian activists could offer the world of news media. Always "pregnant with information" (the motto of faux station WKRH), any



"news" as we're accustomed to receiving it is continually deferred, misinterpreted, or simply lost in translation. An earlier piece, *TV Lip Synch*, 2002, features the two artists lip-synching lines memorized from taped daytime-television programs, including scenes such as an emotional reunion facilitated by Oprah, a prying interview by Barbara Walters, and a heated soap-opera dialogue. A simple, almost sophomoric exercise, *TV Lip Synch* is uncannily affecting. Watching these all-too-familiar, deeply gender-normative tropes filter through bodies in a manner that mimics—but ultimately displaces—rituals of compulsory emulation offers a comical but earnest lesson in cultural resistance.

The politics of the pause, in its resistance to linearity, is particularly well suited, it seems, to feminist engagements with representations of women. Joan Jonas's pivotal early 1970s experiments in video caused the medium to hiccup, literally showing its seams. She, like Greenwood, interacted "live" with her own prerecorded, mythically endowed image, named, appropriately enough, "Organic Honey." In a similar fashion, Lynda Benglis's 1973 *Now* features the artist talking to, touching, and kissing a taped image of herself, a routine that not only questioned temporal distinctions but pointed to the complexities of same-sex desire. Dara Birnbaum, producing works from the late '70s on, disrupted the smooth, uninter-

rupted flow of images meant to be consumed by men and replicated by women—from Wonder Woman to *Hollywood Squares* contestants. Calling herself a "pirate" who made it her business to "talk back to the medium" of TV, she appropriated moving mass-culture images and then repeated them in quick succession, shoring up invisible subtexts.

This quick overview isn't meant to secure any traceable "art" lineage for Greenwood's work, which, of course, resists easy distinctions and suggests new ways of merging "video," "performance," and "music." Rather, it is to situate an element we normally chalk up to bad organization, unfortunate editing, or lack of resolve—the pause—as a space taken up for some time now by feminist artists using video. Employing not only the pause but also

its cousins, the stutter, the misfeed, the misread, the breakdown, and the glitch, Greenwood doesn't simply disrupt the medium of video per se so much as the typically unidirectional flow of information it upholds (one remembers Deleuze's theory of the stutter: To be radical, it not only has to affect words but also redefine the language system as a whole). In *Culture for Pigeon's* liner notes, Greenwood speaks of her own position as a lesbian feminist. "We need deliberate edits to reconstruct an empowered representation of reality," she writes, "one that not only allows for but demands inquiry, challenge, talk-back, yelling, waiting,

and joyful understanding between the 'viewing' individual and at least one other person, possibly a lot more, and maybe even the media makers." Her call, which reads like a mini-manifesto (printed on that tiny, CD-size square), has elements of the '70s feminism she is clearly indebted to but something unmistakably her own as well, something akin to a weary but utopian patina, less didactic, and more suggestive.

About a half hour into the show at the Kitchen, after playing a few songs, thinking through a few "lesbian mythologies," and shifting from foot to foot, Tracy sat down with the audience, saying nonchalantly, "Well, we're really happy to be here, and that's all we've got. So, we're excited to listen to what's going on . . ." She turned the microphone away from her mouth and toward the audience (there were several other mikes positioned throughout the space, and, theoretically, anyone could participate at any time). On the night I was in attendance, nobody said much—nobody said anything, actually. So we all sat for what felt like a long time, on pause, occupying space, self-reflexive and aware of our own choices to speak or to stay quiet, to stretch out or to scrunch up. The band hung around onscreen, Nikki staring blankly and Cola fidgeting, adding a kind of white noise to the live air we were all sitting in, all breathing, together. □

Johanna Burton is a New York-based art historian and critic.

KB Hardy and  
Greenwood  
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