

THE SECOND SKIN IS BLUE

A text about *Worker's Choice*, a performance by Miriam Kongstad.
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As individuals, as women, as Westerners we put on jeans - the contemporary corset. Representing the free, original, authentic West. For several decades the female body has been portrayed as emancipated in favour of advertising jeans. But has she been equally constrained by this material fashion? Miriam Kongstad's performance *Worker's Choice* explores how the feminine body has been choreographed and shaped by jeans over time, and how female appearance is portrayed through historical and contemporary advertising campaigns connected to denim and the fashion industries.

In *Worker's Choice* we encounter two female performers clad in blue denim outfits and cowboy boots. Their hair is tightly-braided, eyelashes heavy with black extensions. The performers inhabit a minimal scenography and installation of objects: a small wooden board on wheels, a swirling lasso, and a large washing bucket filled with water and jeans. A soundscape compliments the scenography, periodically chiming in with sonic fragments seeming to anticipate drama. A showdown ensues. A duel follows, outside the revolving saloon doors on Main Street. The environment depicted is the original habitat of denim and jeans, overlaid with a cold, blueish tint.

A choreography is taking place not only between the two performers, but between them and the soundscape as well. The sound hereby becomes a "third actor" of the performance; an interplay between live actions on stage and a catalog of sonic scenarios and atmospheres, adding, contradicting and commenting on the choreographic narrative unfolding in real time. An old car starts up, the gears springing into action one by one as if a row of mechanical mannequins in a storefront window. The soundscape appears to be in conversation with the performers - sometimes reacted to, sometimes not.

Together, the costume, choreography, scenography and soundscape establish a scene of our collective fantasy of the American West. The cowboy, the milkmaid, the wrangling and the ranch. Sweat, dust and cigarette butts stomped out by a cowboy boot with spurs. This representation of the Western Female is sexualized from the get-go. The skin is sweaty and glistening. The work has always already concluded. We enter the scene at the moment of leisure newly achieved. A pause between the professional and domestic sphere, an exhaling body, still warm from work. Leaning against a wall, back turned away from us, her ass jutting out like a second face, muted and ready to be used.

For more than a year preceding the premiere of *Worker's Choice*, Kongstad collected clippings and text on the advertisement of jeans, from the early 1880s until today. Through this archive of representation, Kongstad studied the evolution and naturalization of gendered body postures, including early workwear advertisements for male mine workers, a "calvinized", hyper-sexualized 15-year-old Brooke Shields as the face of 1980 Calvin Klein Jeans commercials, and today's marketing strategies advocating "gender neutrality" and "female empowerment" by Levi's and Diesel.

The equating of the female subject with animal desire in the advertisements studied by Kongstad influences the performers' behaviour. At times they snap out of their stylized postures, collapsing both physically and abstractly while uttering banal, exclamations of protolanguage, crawling and dragging themselves across the floor. They call to mind an early, sometimes amoebic state of life where body movement and language is still in its most basic or nonexistent form. The tension between different notions of the female body in *Worker's Choice* can be described as oscillating between highly stylized postures and movement patterns

pertaining to representations of the feminine, and a pre-discursive form of inhabiting the body, neither female nor male.

During the performance, a gradual shift in the mobility and agency of the performers occurs: at first the denim manipulates and curbs the bodies, slowly transitioning to the bodies controlling and directing their denim exterior. A transition from the material performing the body to beholding the body performing the material. After this struggle the bodies move freely with newfound ease. The scope of their movement suggests a panorama far beyond the parameters of the performance space, like witnessing an amalgamation of the Grand Canyon and the catwalk of a Victoria's Secret fashion show. This utopian panorama quickly reveals itself as a *fata morgana*, as the grandeur and glamour of a moment of exhalation and power, collapses into spasms and compulsive, competitive behaviour.

Ultimately the performers are caught as if in a panoptic structure: a labyrinthine industrial complex where bodies are reduced to players in a *Packman* game. We leave the two female heroines trapped within this grid prison, predetermined to always re-inscribe into the game of consumption. They are momentarily able to eat away at their denim ghosts, but only to shortly after being on the run again - crying out, simultaneously diminished, wanton and relentless.

Worker's Choice is a study and celebration of struggles within historical and contemporary representation of the capitalized female form, in a territory of limited expression. A damp denim skin is shed, only to reveal an even colder armor underneath – and so the work continues.