

## Return of the Blue Nudes, by Steve Callihan, 1989

Mike Bidlo's re-creation of Yves Klein's 1960 performance work, "Anthropometry of the Blue Period," was a fitting focal point for the "Come as You Art" masked ball that opened COCA's (Center of Contemporary Art) latest show, "Counterfeit Masterpieces of the 20th Century." Multiple Dali impersonators, Vincent Van Gogh without his ear, a figure right out of one of Picasso's blue paintings (looking suitably morose), the obligatory Campbell's Soup can, along with assorted other assumed art identities, set the tone for the evening, which was nothing if not zany, entirely incongruous, and wonderful.

Bidlo's re-creation of Klein's performance work drew the obligatory picketing and leafletting from N.O.W., as well as an attempt to disrupt the event (a number of women yelling, "take it off"), but wide of the mark and most unsuccessful. Perhaps hesitant in the face of the overflow crowd's indifference to it, sensing its lack of support, among both men and women, the protest which was never strong to begin with, faded mostly to silence. A vague awareness of being appropriated, merely becoming part of the show, an additional valence, a somewhat discordant, but strangely appropriate chorus standing at the margin, may have contributed to a retreat from a full confrontation.

Supposedly to satisfy critics of Klein's original performance, who consider it to have been a highly sexist work (whether it was or not is another story), Bidlo's re-creation varied from the original in a number of important ways. Instead of three nude women being dipped in blue paint and then dragged across a canvas like paint brushes, or artist utensils, Bidlo's nudes, responding to his silent prompts, repeatedly dipped their hands in buckets of blue paint, spreading the paint on their own bodies, thighs, arms, bellies, and breasts, and imprinted, impressed, and undulated themselves onto a canvas hanging behind them. What the piece lost in original veracity, sexist or not, it gained in pure unadulterated eroticism. In comparison, Klein's work must have seemed staid and uptight, despite its controversial content--sexy it was not, which cannot be said of Bidlo's re-creation. Instead of Klein's nudes as the objects of the artist's manipulation, Bidlo's re-creation tended strongly toward the autoerotic, but also toward an unconsciousness and innocence that was refreshing rather than offensive. (Fingerpainting, among other analogies, comes to mind.) In another sense, the undulating movement of the nudes transformed the piece into a dance no dance company would probably ever perform, an unabashed bacchanal, far more sensuous, erotic, and beautiful than anything you might see in a topless/bottomless club, or on any late-night cable channel (or in an artist's studio, for that matter).

Bidlo's work was in a very real sense a restatement, rather than a mere re-creation. A tribute, which I take Bidlo's Blue Nudes to be, should not merely mimic or copy, but should originate its own meaning in the present and not simply be the recalling of a past event. If it is to be an improvement on the original, it must also be an expansion on it. The re-creation, in this sense, is rerooted in the present moment, the original model serving only as a reference. The significance of the work, if it is a true work, is relative to the present world within which it exists, but also a movement to occupy and capture the ground of the future.

Bidlo's Blue Nudes is the denial, even the assassination, of "today's art," and its re-creation as living body, as future present. Its guise as mere recreation, which was itself a subterfuge, and in

tone with the even more obvious "copies" of the remainder of the show, veiled one of its prime targets: tame, sanitized, and deferential works of art which themselves have been appropriated by the fatal combination of government-influenced art commissions and corporate art buyers who are only interested in art that offends no-one. Bidlo's performance work contained a hidden stiletto aimed directly at the heart of the inhibition, bondage, and unfreedom of today's art world. Rather than the mere re-presenting of a work now out-of-date, Bidlo's Blue Nudes is a direct, and full-frontal, assault on vapid and false art values ("office art"). Art is restated as freedom as opposed to servitude. The Blue Nudes, as flesh expanding freely into idea, signify a release, an escape, from entrapment within the enslaving rhetoric of the mind and servitude to repressed societal prohibitionists. They are a declaration of war, an open rebellion against today's "police art" regime. As art, they are outlaw art.

In the work is the announcement of the triumphant return of the living female body (and not merely "form") to a center within art from which it had been banished and exiled too long. And along with it, the return of the erotic as the charged center of romance, with passion and nature as the living embodiment of art, rather than reason and rhetoric, desire, and eros, as no longer unseemly, but essential. Pure excitement as the only remedy for what has become a very drab affair.

Not as a matter of intellectual discernment, but of enactment and incorporation, the goddess (who seems to come often in threes), dances before us. Enthusiasm and ecstasy, the god within and the self beyond the body, are her bipolarities--the body electric, the ego removed to the horizon. We, ourselves, become the dance, a dissolution of all separateness. There is no difference, for it is all one festival, one dance.

The Blue Nudes are myth in reverse, the Mystery inside out, not the unveiling of a secret and sacred object of an Eleusinian mystery, otherwise concealed and veiled from the eyes of the uninitiated, but the truth as that which is always unconcealed except that we choose not to see it. The nudes, appearing suddenly before us, naked to the buff, have no need for veils--they are the standing truths of themselves. If their bodies carry with them the import of the sensual and the sexual, they do so naturally, without need for excuse or rationalization. It is not a "strip show," sacred or otherwise, for there is nothing to be stripped, no veil to be removed, nothing to be revealed that had formerly been concealed. The nudes stand not as symbols, representing categories foreign to their own natures, but as the initial state prior to free and exultant movement, as unabstraction to the extreme. (How "abstract" Klein's work seems in comparison.) There is nothing rhetorical here, except it be the projection of the unengaged beholder (whether "sexist" or "feminist" is no matter, each seeing only its own image, one salacious, the other prudish).

But truth, by itself, is static, not dynamic. In this sense, its unconcealment is also its unreality, or super-reality. As long as we merely behold the truth, the real, or whatever, we have not been engaged by it. We are separated by distance and exiled within our own minds. The world as Apollonian representation is, after all, the highest form of illusion, that of a world separate from and unconnected to what is, after all, a groundless observer. It is only in Dionysian enactment, in

a taking up of the water of life, that the abyss is crossed. In the first case, dream can only be an estrangement, at most sought as a refabrication, an exteriorization of lost desire, while in the case of Dionysian enactment, the dream seeks to become, and flow into, life.

The enactment, in this case paint to hand, hand to body, body to canvas, is itself a revealing, but one which succeeds in revealing much more thoroughly than it conceals. Rather than static self-representation, the body as object present to a beholder, eros reveals itself as a dynamic action, as the transformation of the dream into life. The revealing is in the form of an action, more completely erotic than any merely static body could ever manage to represent. Eros lives within the dream, and conjoins itself with life, becomes life, in exultant and free action. The erotic cannot be divorced from life, and have anything "living" remain. Without desire, love is reduced to mere sentiment, will to intention. Without desire, life is empty.

But in becoming living integers (more than one, consummate of all), we become the opposite of "consumers" (consumers of the body, of life), but rather the ex-pressing of our dynamic and living essence, for in action, in the dance of life, we "outer" ourselves (ecstasy), while at the same time becoming truly what we are (enthusiasm). The Blue Nudes offer themselves, not to us, but to the canvas of life, inviting us to do the same. Not as the projection of desire alienated from ourselves onto another as object, but self-desire expressing itself forth, openly, as freedom.

*This piece was originally written in Seattle in the fall of 1989, although it was never published. I am publishing it here for the first time.*

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