

Marianna Simnett
LIES

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Seventeen New York

We are drawn to narratives of separated twins reconvening against all odds, of women's periods synching, of ESP and entanglement. We love soul mates and doppelgängers and sometimes we love sharing a virus. I can only speculate that we feel taken with these things because they evince some inexplicable extra-human connection that acts upon the physical but is also immaterial. These are near-spectral phenomena, situations that prove our porosity and perhaps, the body's will to empathy.

Such complexities are fodder for the artist Marianna Simnett. Her work in installation and film revolves around or produces situations in which embodied experience serves as a counter to immateriality. Her project seems to ground or reassert the body against narratives—threatening or utopian—of an all-pervasive digital network and the impact those narratives have on our conceptions of self and the limits of our physical beings. But also, she considers the ways in which technology has changed our ability to relate to and shape our bodies, making those processes more fluid. Her first major series

of works, a trilogy of films, *The Udder* (2014), *Blood* (2015), and *Blue Roses* (2015), is a psychedelic opera about sworn virgins and the complexities of gender, contamination and corruption, cosmetic manipulation and Freudian experiments. She threads together perverse folkloric narratives and documentary, scored with original compositions of vocal washes, plot-driving cello plucks, and pop songs. Her imagery is often nausea inducing; but it makes viscera and broken bodies pretty. We see uncompromising close up shots of udders, dismembered legs with turgid varicose veins, robot cockroaches, personified turbinate bones chomping away at an enormous papier-mâché nose, and the artist's head filling with blood as she hangs upside down in some cold, blue, underworld.

Two recent works have distilled the concerns of Simnett's previous projects: Each is based on a single performance of an extreme corporeal intervention that is temporary. In *Faint with Light* and *The Needle and the Larynx* (both 2016), Simnett plays with the medium of her body as



Blue Roses (2015), video still.

cavalierly as one might play with their online avatar given the ephemerality and flexibility of its digital presentation. Or rather, it is perhaps this mindset of provisionality—one that is already familiar to most of us—that compels her to undergo significant physical duress. It's this paradigm of the temporary that has made the world seem more approachable, I'd wager, less weighted. And it's made us freer, if even from any lurking suspicion of moral determinism. But we've seen in major events in world politics in the last several months that this recalibration of our understanding of consequences, no doubt facilitated by the dominance of social media, can be dire. In her recent works, Simnett has taken

this condition and applied it to her body, seeking in her performances an empathy that might be mutually felt by the viewer.

Leslie Jamison, in her 2014 essay collection *The Empathy Exams*, reminds us, “empathy comes from the Greek *empathēia*—*em* (into) and *pathos* (feeling)—a penetration, a kind of travel. It suggests you enter another person's pain as you'd enter another country, through immigration and customs, border crossing by way of query: What grows where you are? What are the laws? What animals graze there?” Fainting, or syncope, is perhaps the ultimate form of empathy—or at least the most visible manifestation of it. It is

a gesture that indicates, “I have travelled with you as far as I can physically bear it.” We hear of fathers-to-be wilting at the sight of their partners’ labor, or of slaughterhouse documentaries causing audience members to collapse. It’s true that fainting is also associated with cowards and the weak-kneed, but in fact, the etymology of syncope brings us to the Greek word for *pause*. This refusal of the body to continue, to fight through pain shared or felt alone, is an involuntary gesture of self-preservation.

Simnett’s *Faint with Light* (2016) is an audio and light installation that centers on a recording of the artist repeatedly fainting through self-induced hyperventilation.

To achieve this, the artist folded over her knees, clutching her ribcage to constrict her breath, and heaved shallow, labored breaths until she was taken over by dizziness and lost feeling in her extremities—about two minutes in. She then stood up and exhaled, causing her to faint. An eleven-minute loop plays a cycle of four falls, as many as she could manage before she began to seize and a medic who attended the act recommended she stop. A large screen-like structure, composed of fifty horizontal strips of LED lit aluminum arranged with intermittent space, serves as an index for the intensity of each of these breaths. The light corresponds with the audio,



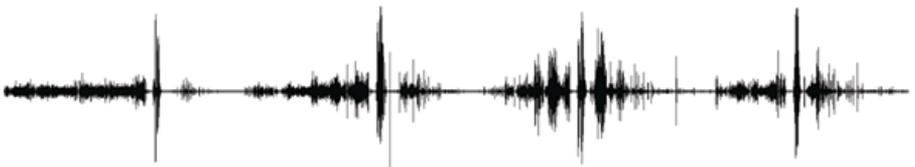
Faint with Light (2016), documentation: Simnett fainting at Factory UK 23.12.15

each bar indicating a volume level, and the loudest gasps max out at the top of the screen, surpassing it. When the screen is both dark and fully lit, the artist blacked out or coming to, we have the metaphorical double bind of the artist having exited awareness and fully entered herself—she has brought herself off screen and into her body.

Installed as it is at Seventeen, the work is encountered in a dark room pierced with pulsing light. In its claustrophobic and disorienting effects, it recalls Ken Jacobs' throbbing, flickering structuralist films, which Amy Taubin once described as "reveal[ing] the skull beneath the skin." Structuralist film isn't such a leap here in terms of an approach to medium—the dedication to deconstructing the formal and material properties of cinema isn't unlike Simnett's laying bare the limits of her medium, her body, and its breaking point. The sound of this

is inescapable: urgent breathing that seems to fracture as it repeats, its top and bottom notes open to an octave, into spit and dry heaving and frail swallowing that finally seizes in a spasm, an uncanny sound and a slow groan that evokes some hybrid creature. Slowly, the breaths become again measured and recognizable.

Listening, I felt physically ill. I felt a tingling sensation, nausea, anxiety. I felt desperate, actually, to stop listening. I felt my body open up to the vertiginous unknown of what happens when the involuntary becomes voluntary—the hollowed out paranoia that always lurks behind our lived experience but that we rarely let ourselves face down: What if I overthink what it means to breathe? Can I confuse my mechanics by scrutinizing them and cause a system shutdown? Is my body capable of forgetting how to take in enough air, to let it out?



Faint with Light (2016), documentation: audio waves of four consecutive faints.

I imagine this embodied response is a typical one, and it can't help but drum up in its viewers their own experiences of extremity and restriction—I think of a time I nearly drowned in a rafting accident, a time when my ex-boyfriend choked in a restaurant, a time another ex-boyfriend died from an epileptic seizure. These associations came hard and fast. Simnett connects fainting with her grandfather. During the Holocaust, he buckled as guns were fired at him in a mass execution. The faint saved his life. His body shut down to self-preserve. The artist made her first work on the subject in 2012, while she was a student at the Slade. She intercut documentation of her grandfather's story with tightly framed shots of herself, hyperventilating until she collapsed and audibly smacked her head. Simnett's grandfather became mute not long after the war, a fact that seems conversely mirrored in these works that are so reliant on the persuasions of sound.

The heart churns, blood pressure percolates, vessels dilate, pressure drops and blood

succumbs to gravity, falling away from the brain. We fall when this happens as a mechanism to return the blood to the head. To be horizontal is, of course, healing. To be horizontal is to return to the ground—to nature and to death. Odysseus fainted when he reached the land of the Phaeacians: *That moment, fainting as he touch'd the shore, He dropp'd his sinewy arms: his knees no more Perform'd their office, or his weight upheld: His swoln heart heaved; his bloated body swell'd: From mouth and nose the briny torrent ran; And lost in lassitude lay all the man, Deprived of voice, of motion, and of breath; The soul scarce waking in the arms of death. . . .* But to impel oneself to faint is to play with death, to taunt it. Think of patricians swooning over scandal, revived by smelling salts. To fake a faint is to participate in a drama of ecstasy and crisis—the double entendre of lying isn't lost here.

In the fifteen-minute video *The Needle and the Larynx* there is a lilting refrain of “lies, lies, lies.” The work documents the artist in the hands of a leading gender reassignment surgeon as he injects her cricothyroid muscle with Botox, effectively paralyzing the muscle and

lowering her voice. It is a procedure for men with a condition called puberphonia, or for men who do not perceive their voices to be low enough, but here, we see a picture of onscreen femininity: Simnett in a crisp white dress with a platinum blonde bob, her large blue eyes fringed with mascara. Played back at a crawling, hypnagogic quarter speed, we watch the surgeon fill a syringe, place electrodes on the artist's neck, and plunge a needle into her throat—the slowness mimics the paralysis being performed.

In surround sound, we hear a Grimm-worthy story told by the artist, her voice digitally altered to speak three parts: the

high-pitched girl, the low-pitched surgeon, and the temperature—an omnipotent spirit. It's a parable about gender, about nature and artifice, about control and deception. In short, a girl wants a surgeon to “make [her] voice low so that it trembles with the earth and is closer to those groans outside that keep [her] turning in the night.” He refuses, citing that girls are high and boys are low, but she threatens him, asking the temperature to rise, to warm his blood so that a swarm of mosquitoes will suck him dry. The artist voices the story's conclusion after her procedure, once the Botox had set in. Her deep resounding tones are underscored by the girl's wickedly lofty laughter echoing in the distance.



The Needle and the Larynx (2016), video still.

Told over a fluidly building score of cello (played by Oliver Coates) and a swelling pitch of mosquitos, the story is interlarded with a melancholy pop song with droopy harmonies and a short history of Botox, set to the mournful horns of Henry Purcell's *Music for the Funeral of Queen Mary*. Simnett recites the symptoms of botulism, and then vividly narrates them, lingering on the lurid. We also hear from the artist, fragile and scratchy, about forty-eight hours after the procedure: "It felt like someone was holding my throat from behind and because he was poking the needle left and right trying to detect which part to inject... you suddenly become conscious of all the parts of your throat."

This description brings to the work the uncanniness made more explicit in *Faint with Light*—of opening up to the complexities and contours of something that is and has always been a part of oneself. As the doctor pulls the needle from Simnett's neck, I think again of Jamison: "Empathy means realizing no trauma has discrete edges. Trauma bleeds. Out of wounds and across boundaries." Indeed,

Botox and lying go hand in hand, wed to the futility and frustration of trying to skip nature's plans. But it's a toxin that is chosen often to quell a deeper pain—as it is with all pharmacology. Simnett's minor accelerations and decelerations of the body are disquieting, but they are also generous; she crosses boundaries for us, allowing the viewer to pause, to exit, when they choose to.

— Annie Godfrey Larmon

The Needle and the Larynx (2016)

Written, Performed and Edited by

Producer

Director of Photography

1st AC/Focus Puller

Sound Recordist

Sound Design

Colorist

Visual Effects

Music

Tommib Help Buss

Music for the Funeral of Queen Mary

Paralyze

Vocals

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Faint with Light (2016)

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