

SPACES TO BE REHEARSED

Sabeth Buchmann

¹ See Greg Lynn, *Animate Form* (Princeton Architectural Press, 1999), 8–43.

Five takes on what seems like the same scene: the green screen–esque setup evokes a virtual film studio, symbolically equipped with the usual technology, where performers appear to be rehearsing gestures, poses, and sequences of movements against changing backgrounds. At times we see the performers in close-up fragments; at other times they dissolve in disorienting totality. The five-channel video installation *Ninfa Atlas*—the title alludes to Aby Warburg’s *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne*—casts these performers as contemporary nymphs in reproductions of architectural, urban, and natural landscapes. Repeatedly circling the performers, the virtual camera records them in front of wall-scaled photographic backdrops: a desolate industrial town (*Gustine*), a tackily luxurious hotel lobby (*Jobel*), factory and office buildings (*Cecilia*), the Renaissance-style façades of suburban buildings (*Ryan*), and a country house by a river (*Abriel*). The interplay between choreography and scenery takes on an explicitly performative character, as if it were animating and transforming the relationships between the studio-like spaces and the nymph-like poses reenacted in them. Meanwhile, the backgrounds serve as both functional props and conceptual objects, blending material and virtual realities to the point of indistinguishability. This performativity is further enhanced by an immersive soundscape, seemingly sampled on a synthesizer, which combines heavy breathing, panting, rubbing, and scratching noises. Vaguely reminiscent of assembly lines, this staccato, repetitive sound renders physical exercise as self-optimization.

These five scenes recall the thesis of the American architect, philosopher, and author Greg Lynn, who argues that simulated worlds do not annul physical perception but rather model and realize its changes.¹ The future thus appears as a form of visually anticipated *re*-presentation. So-called second reality is therefore merely a mode of the digitizable “real,” which Marsh exploits by evoking its (self-) performance. The reenactments of the nymphs, for example, are based on a sequence of poses connected by intervals, known as “phrases” in dance. In a conversation with Anna Sinofzik, Marsh describes how these sequences were recorded from all sides in a motion-capture studio and refigured as “3D assets,” a process used in videogame design. She explains that volumetric video capture is a

“new, virtual form of filmmaking that is hoped to revolutionize the industry,” in which a performer is “filmed in a green screen studio from countless perspectives using at least 106 synchronized cameras, meaning that their movements can be recreated from any angle on demand in postproduction. There’s no need to film on location, and so you can work anywhere.”²

This process allows Marsh to freely rotate performances and poses: the stock-photo backdrops appear as prefabricated visual worlds, chosen to accompany the prototypical nymphs. We thus observe in *Ninfa Atlas* a formal correspondence between the reexploration of classical poses and the technical trickery of digital simulation. For while rehearsals are generally open-ended processes that expose the “making of” poses, gestures, and movements, simulated environments are speculative experiments in capturing the potentially (and only potentially) “real.” I borrow the term “rehearsal” from the Spanish philosopher José Manuel Bueso, who, in his essay “The Play’s the Thing: On the Politics of Rehearsal” (2016), traces its etymological and linguistic implications. While the French term *répétition* implies reiteration and recurrence, its German equivalent *Probe* has two potential meanings: theater rehearsal (*Theaterprobe*) and lab sample (*Laborprobe*). The corresponding Spanish noun *ensayo* also refers to the literary essay and can be translated as “trial and error,” “test,” or “failed attempt.” The French *représentation* and the Spanish *representación* are also used to refer to an actual performance. While the English term “rehearsal” has firmly theatrical associations, the lexical constellation of test/repetition/essay opens onto a universe of meaning that suggests an experimental arrangement.³ As with the Latin verb *experiri*, which means something like “try, examine, test without fixed rules,”⁴ the concepts of rehearsal and artistic experiment thus overlap semantically when viewed across languages. Repetition can therefore be understood in two diametrically opposed and mutually referential senses: as a finite procedure of testing and examination or as an open-ended process.⁵

In my view, the ambiguities inherent in the concept of rehearsal also parallel the ambivalences at the core of Marsh’s work. In *Ninfa Atlas*, the reduction of set designs to a few elements and the economy of the performances make them appear simultaneously serial and determinate, provisional

2 Anna Sinofzik, “Künstlerin Lynne Marsh: ‘Wir können uns vom männlichen Blick nicht befreien aber wir sollten konstruktiv mit ihm arbeiten,’” *Monopol: Magazin für Kunst und Leben*, December 2021, <https://www.monopol-magazin.de/interview-lynne-marsh-aby-warburg-ninfa-atlas-wir-koennen-uns-vom-maennlichen-blick-nicht-befreien-aber-wir-sollten-konstruktiv-mit-ihm-arbeiten>.

3 José Manuel Bueso, “The Play’s the Thing: On the Politics of Rehearsal,” in *Putting Rehearsals to the Test: Practices of Rehearsal in Fine Arts, Film, Theater, Theory, and Politics*, ed. Sabeth Buchmann, Ilse Lafer, and Constanze Ruhm (Sternberg Press, 2016), 113.

4 Christian Berger, *Wiederholung und Experiment bei Edgar Degas* (Dietrich Reimer, 2014), 12.

5 Bueso, 113.

6 Jan Tumlir, “Lynne Marsh: Barbara & Art Culver Center of the Arts,” *Artforum* 60, no. 6 (February 2022): 165.

7 Ibid.

and representative, experimental and conceptual. This tension forms the crux of the videos, which build on the performers’ interpretation of her visual scores. Working from digital copies of Warburg’s universalist inventory of gestures that cross time, cultures, and genres, Marsh produced these scores by isolating selected figures.⁶ Her choice of nymphs is surely no coincidence: these natural spirits bear feminine connotations and are iconographically associated with rivers, seas, air, forests, and mountains. Since Marsh’s set designs allude to some of these geographical categories, the virtual studio overlaps with historically loaded traditions of artistic representation, which cast nymphs as either companions of deities or autonomous figures. While Warburg analyzed the figure of the nymph as a prefiguration of new forms,⁷ its relevance to the notion of rehearsal also stems from its transitory potential, which is all the more significant given that Marsh’s repetitive structure seems to invoke Warburg’s method of visual comparison.

The serial but staccato and seemingly edited gestures of the performers thus appear feminized, even effete, casting them as gendered figurations across a spectrum of skin colors and ethnic markers. In their prototypical environments, then, we may infer allusions to physical, administrative, and everyday forms of labor and reproduction. I therefore read *Ninfa Atlas* as a performative (re)exploration of the structural relationship between imagination and subjectivization that became a central aim of feminist film in the 1970s. It is no accident that the figure of the nymph recalls the misogynistic concept of “nymphomania,” which stands for “excessive” female desire and the sort of defiant promiscuity that is generally the exclusive prerogative of men. Aesthetically reminiscent of avant-garde montage and editing, the technologically alienated interpretations of Marsh’s scores can thus be read as politically motivated deformations of misogynistic codes of meaning and representation, in the tradition of feminist-queer critiques of patriarchy. It is all the more telling, then, that the rehearsal process itself is the source code for a nonhierarchical form of production, building on the feedback procedures that have fueled concepts of feminist dance and film, most notably in the work of Anna Halprin and Yvonne Rainer.

With Marsh, however, the rehearsal process is also

subject to socio-technologically determined conditions. In her conversation with Anna Sinofzik, Marsh describes finding herself “confronted with the fact she couldn’t physically work with the performers” as a result of the pandemic and lockdown, forcing them to “exchange ideas over Zoom” instead.⁸ Rehearsals took place “from a distance,” with the performers “filming themselves improvising” and sending her the recorded material. Marsh continues:

I edited it and sent it back so they could put it into motion. This went back and forth, in small feedback loops across digital platforms. This form of connection, combined with a feeling of isolation, can be sensed in the work, in these very individual performances. In the end, they did all have to visit a physical studio to be recorded and transformed into 3D assets. But basically, the virtual space became a studio for us. I then brought the individual assets into my computer where I could view them any way I wanted with a virtual camera. Originally, I wanted to place the characters I created in the real world, but in the end I simulated the studio where we were filming and integrated them into this computer-generated replica of the real space. The final form of the work was greatly influenced by the reality in which we were moving due to the limitations.⁹

I quote Marsh’s comments at length because they recall the simulative intertwining of visual and spatial perspectives, and thus the suggestion of haptic three-dimensionality, in traditional trompe l’oeil. Still used in scenery painting, the technique of trompe l’oeil is normally employed to simulate transitions between foreground and background, interior and exterior space, stage and backstage—the very spatial effects that digital technology now makes possible. The association with this technique is further reinforced by the circular movements of Marsh’s virtual cameras, which produce a dynamic between proximity, distance, and scale that lends the visual surfaces a deceptive sense of tactility.

Marsh’s comments also point to the interplay between technical and artistic processes as a *dispositif* tested “in the making” itself, which is based on communicative collaboration

⁸ Sinofzik.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Keller Easterling, *Extrastatecraft: The Power of Infrastructure Space* (Verso, 2014), 82–83. For the distinction between “knowing that” and “knowing how,” Easterling refers to the twentieth-century philosophers Michael Polanyi and Gilbert Ryle.

¹¹ Easterling, 27.

¹² Easterling, 11.

between the artist and the performers. The virtual studio’s blending of artistic experiment and technical laboratory suggests that Bueso’s definition of rehearsal might be expanded to include Keller Easterling’s concept of “infrastructural disposition,” which the American architectural theorist links to Foucault’s concept of the *dispositif*. In her books *Extrastatecraft: The Power of Infrastructure Space* (2014) and *Medium Design: Knowing How to Build the World* (2020), Easterling argues that we need to learn to activate context-dependent knowledge about spatial dispositions. She draws a distinction between “knowing that,” which relates to objects, and “knowing how,” which relates to situations: while knowing *that* means being able to give a correct answer, knowing *how* refers to the ability to do something.¹⁰ In dealing with ubiquitous infrastructures, Easterling argues that “well-rehearsed knowledge” is essential. In contrast to knowledge that is “under-rehearsed,”¹¹ this involves an ongoing process of learning how best to deal with bodies, spaces, and technologies in specific situations—the “knowing how” which I also consider a central aspect of Marsh’s work. It is only this repeatedly tested knowledge, Easterling argues, that enables us to develop a competent, critical, or even subversive approach to phenomena such as SIM cards, surveillance cameras, shopping malls, parking lots, and holiday resorts. These all shape our patterns of living, work, reproduction, and consumption, just as they do our orientations and habits—social and communicative, aesthetic and cultural, gendered and sexual.¹²

According to Easterling, a performative understanding of rehearsal allows artistic, scientific, and everyday practices to be linked together. Rehearsal-based methods refer to abilities gained through practice, which can be called upon according to the situation in order to transform learned patterns of behavior and movement into acts of self-empowerment. Testing out unpracticed bodily movements thus requires variable performance. Drawing on the actor-network theory of Bruno Latour, Easterling grasps infrastructures as active and networked forms, shifting the emphasis onto the effects of these infrastructures (on us) in real and virtual milieus.

With its five movement rehearsals, *Ninfa Atlas* displays a related awareness of networked infrastructures, entwining bodies, technologies, and urban or rural environments with

work, leisure, and consumer architectures. At the same time, the installation displays an awareness of the forms of communication and movement in which art not only participates, but actively inhabits and helps bring into being—as with Ryan’s performance in front of antiquated Renaissance façades and fountains, which represents historical models of the scenic body.

Viewed from this perspective, infrastructural “dispositions” steer, determine, expand, and limit the structure, radius, and flexibility of the body, and thus shape the ways in which our social lives are regulated and represented. Correspondingly, the serialized clips of the performers’ movements and the symbolic studio sets both constitute dispositions, in the sense that they are activated, repeated, and varied. They each portray dispositions of scenarios which are not yet possible but might be in the future. Just as the principle of “repetition” serves to break open and interrupt figurative coherence and narrative flow, *Ninfa Atlas* appears as an ensemble of unfinished forms to be repeatedly tested out anew according to the site and situation of exhibition. If we perceive Marsh’s studio environments as virtual laboratories, it is because the gestures tested out by the performers also test our capacity for perception. In this sense, Marsh’s choreographies recall the (post)minimalist choreographies and video performances produced by Bruce Nauman and Yvonne Rainer in the mid- to late 1960s, which sought to consider increasing processes of industrialization and medi- atization, an aspiration that manifested itself primarily at the intersections of human and machine, body and technology.

The associated transformation of the concept of art resonates with and is further developed in Marsh’s 2018 video installation *Taking Positions*, in which three vertical screens propped up on three L-shaped mobile plinths evoke mixtures of postminimalist cinema screens and performers. Carefully scanned by the camera and presented on body-sized screens to the swelling and subsiding sounds of birdsong, the building, and the street, the performers’ poses cast them as beings metabolizing organic and inorganic elements. Oscillating between everyday and engineered gestures, the performers (who appear visibly queer) move in front of backgrounds that gradually morph into abstract geometries. These abstract colored elements invade the screens, dividing them into zones, stripes, and

¹³ Joan Key, “History as Context,” in Lynne Marsh, *Taking Positions*, exh. booklet (Tintype Gallery, 2018), n.p.

¹⁴ Ibid.

halves, before filling them up entirely, like monochrome paintings. Pushing the performers across the screens and drawing them in, these colored geometries also infer the choreographic scores that underpin the performers’ bodily movements. This can be read as a highly reflective stance toward (formalist) high art’s resistance to genre, and thus to the tragic, melodramatic, comedic, burlesque, and so on, as well as to the “female,” “queer,” or “Other.”

This resistance is thematized by Marsh in her critical reference to the German sculptor Arno Breker (1900–1991), a celebrated and notorious figure whose idealized, heroized, and vitalized portrayals of the human form earned him a place on Hitler’s list of “divinely gifted” artists. Marsh’s work demonstrates the fascist implications of Breker’s aesthetic. *Taking Positions* was filmed in the studio Breker used during the Second World War,¹³ once again highlighting the interplay between bodily performance and architecture, but now considered in the context of a modernism that was highly ambivalent and fragile in ideological, political, and aesthetic terms. In her accompanying exhibition text, for example, Joan Key points out the “socially progressive” aspects of Breker’s work,¹⁴ which stemmed from his connections with the Parisian avant-garde. Marsh confronts this tension by deploying references to Josef Albers, whose geometric-abstract aesthetic has come to represent a typically leftist version of the same social utopia, namely, the German Bauhaus, whose teachers and students went on to become both victims and followers of the Nazi regime.

Marsh’s performative reconstruction of Breker’s sculptures through poses caught between stasis and movement once again recalls classical imagery such as Edgar Degas’s paintings and drawings of ballet dancers in rehearsal. In his famous painting *La répétition* (1874), Degas too shows us not only the moment of exercise, but also the instants that precede and follow it. He thus includes what classical representation usually excludes, steering our gaze toward the “infrastructural”—the physical-material, socio-cultural, and spatio-economic aspects of artistic labor, rendered in subjective expressive registers. At the same time, the shift that Marsh effects between choreographic figuration and compositional abstraction can also be related to Albers’s teaching methods, which accompanied his

lifelong investigations into composition, color, lines, and surfaces. As the Canadian art historian T'ai Smith describes in her 2014 book *Bauhaus Weaving Theory: From Feminine Craft to Mode of Design*, Albers approached the teaching of painting like a stage rehearsal during his time at both the Weimar and Dessau Bauhaus (1923–32) and Black Mountain College in North Carolina (1933–49). He taught his students to treat colors like individual members of an ensemble acting alongside one another. His method deviated from traditional art instruction by inviting students to experience firsthand how colors work together, such as when they should be foregrounded or backgrounded. Colors thus became subjects in an improvised role-playing whose “performance” was based on testing out their most aesthetically effective combinations. By borrowing from the method of theatrical rehearsal, Albers taught his students how to make the appearance and behavior of colors dependent on their interaction¹⁵—a relational approach to artistic thinking that he describes in his 1963 book *Interaction of Color*,¹⁶ produced with the help of his students and still considered a classic text of art pedagogy.¹⁷

It is precisely this connection between art and theater, anchored in modernism and rejected by American formalist critics such as Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried, that is further developed in *Taking Positions* as experiments conducted under the conditions of present-day (industrial) technologies. In the installation, geometric abstraction and performative figuration both feed on the transmedia interplay of form, color, and dance. This is perhaps best expressed in the correspondences between the colors of the performers’ costumes and those of the backgrounds, whose structures recall TV test patterns. As Key explains, Marsh replaced Albers’s color compositions with contemporary Pantone shades, which she then subjected to “the Munsell-like algorithm of colour adjustment underlying modern digital production values.”¹⁸

I read Marsh’s chosen genre of performative video installation as testing out such modernist legacies with the help of contemporary media technologies—as an experiment in which the desire to find a progressive visual language is combined with a performative and thus generative “spectatorship.” By this I mean the “making of” gestures, poses, colors, and

¹⁵ T'ai Smith, *Bauhaus Weaving Theory: From Feminine Craft to Mode of Design* (University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 154–55.

¹⁶ Josef Albers, *Interaction of Color* (Yale University Press, 1963).

¹⁷ See Sabeth Buchmann, *Kunst als Infrastruktur* (Buchhandlung Walther König, 2023), 14–21.

¹⁸ Key, n.p.

¹⁹ Stefanie Diekmann, *Backstage: Konstellationen von Theater und Kino* (Kulturverlag Kamos, 2013), 19.

²⁰ Andrea Fraser, “Was ist Institutionskritik?,” *Texte zur Kunst* 15, no. 59 (September 2005): 87.

forms before our eyes, which never takes aesthetic perception as a given but rather assumes that it is always situational and thus variable. This is also illustrated by the works in which Marsh turns the backstage, the offstage, or their actors into the central arena of a performance; these include the single- and two-channel installations *Camera Opera* (2008), *The Philharmonie Project (Bruckner: Symphony No. 5, movements 1 & 4)* (2011), *The Philharmonie Project (Nielsen: Symphony No. 5)* (2011), and *Stage Backstage* (2011), and the feature film *Tragedy* (2015–16). In these works, those who are normally kept out of view behind sets and curtains—stagehands, camera technicians, prompters, costume and makeup artists, etc.—become subject to the documentary gaze of the camera. As with the news anchor in *Camera Opera* waiting to make her appearance, it is the perspective of the staff that we occasionally adopt, glimpsing their work and following the technical rehearsals, blocking rehearsals, and dry runs that are usually hidden or overlooked.

This brings voice and sound, interpersonal interactions, technical details, and fleeting moments to the fore, connecting Marsh’s works with the tradition of materialist critique of the image and spectacle, a tradition that has repeatedly proven effective in producing new and metareflexive forms of work. As the German media and theater scholar Stefanie Diekmann demonstrates in her book *Backstage: Konstellationen von Theater und Kino* (Backstage: Constellations of Theater and Cinema), exposing the backstage or offstage is a central feature of approaches aiming to “reorganize theatrical space.” As such, hybrid formats are an integral element of popular theatrical and cinematic tropes, in which the inversion of stage and backstage serves to “dissolve familiar spatial orders into other typologies.” According to Diekmann, “location changes and boundary-dissolving movements” can test the “demarcation lines” between the real and the fictitious, the social and the aesthetic, the physical and the immaterial, and the documentary and the fictional.¹⁹

The backstage and offstage thus always constitute an immanent outside perspective on institutions, a genre- and medium-specific form of “site-specific analysis” (Andrea Fraser).²⁰ The connection of auditorium and backstage evokes nothing less than an intertwining of “material basis” and

“symbolic superstructure”—an approach that comes as close to Bertolt Brecht’s concept of “distancing,” or “alienating” audiences by exposing the artificial, as it does to Guy Debord’s critique of spectacle. The inversion of space becomes an inversion of the gaze, creating an interplay between visibility and concealment that reveals the idea and procedure of rehearsal as an infrastructural disposition—an inversion that counters the facticity of what images and sounds communicate by demonstrating how their meanings can be skewed and distorted through reappropriation. What if audiences were given the “tools” needed to read and understand the scripts and dispositions that steer their patterns of perception, affect, and consumption, and thus their aesthetic criteria and preferences?

Again, this question draws our attention to the connection between rehearsal and infrastructure. In so doing, it moves beyond Bueso’s and Easterling’s definitions to include American anthropologist Brian Larkin’s concept of “ethnographic retooling,” which he describes as a method of investigating how infrastructures are built. Larkin describes a practice of “system building”²¹ which is also characteristic of Marsh’s methods and techniques. Material infrastructures, he argues, never stand alone but overlap and multiply into complex systems. Contemporary art often seeks to counter socially dominant regimes of discipline and control with practices of emancipatory knowledge appropriation and self-empowerment. In the face of this popular but not unheroic aspiration, rehearsal seems to be a relatively “realistic” and pragmatic “tool,” focused less on the event-fixated revolutionary gesture and more on long-term persistence.

Following Larkin, Marsh’s processes and techniques might therefore be described as “semiotic and aesthetic vehicles.” Depending on the camera’s position, they can appear as either distinct elements, choreographed ensembles, or (infra)structural relations between the bodies, objects, and backgrounds, in a reflection that is entirely contemplative but all the more differentiated and careful.²² By ordering our gaze in ways that always seem slightly “unnatural,” Marsh’s works encourage a (self-)reflexive and thus probing view of the overlaps between “real” and “virtual” worlds—a nexus at the core of her program. Correspondingly, the (re)enacted gestures and poses, played through colors, forms, spaces, and apparatuses, appear as

²¹ Brian Larkin, “The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 42 (2013): 328.

²² See Brian Larkin, “Promising Forms: The Political Aesthetics of Infrastructure,” in *The Promise of Infrastructure*, ed. Nikhil Anand, Akhil Gupta, and Hannah Appel (Duke University Press, 2018), 329.

“vehicles” and “dispositions” created and altered in the process of symbolization. This is what allows us to read Marsh’s multifaceted experiments in rehearsal as a fundamentally material condition of the aesthetic. Her continued engagement with procedures of rehearsal constitutes a *modus operandi* that yields a deeply aesthetic feeling for the infrastructural—for the mostly unperceived relations between bodies, objects, and environments. It is in the feminized and effeminate figure of the nymph that these relations find their prefiguration, which still matters to this day.

Translated from the German by Ben Caton.