

Esther Neff, *The Scraping Shape of the Socially Cyclomythic Womb* (2016).

Photo: Julia Bauer, Courtesy of Tempting Failure

### **Esther Neff – *The Scraping Shape of the Socially Cyclomythic Womb* (2016)**

By David LaGaccia

Performance can make me anxious, because it can reveal another side of a person that often lays hidden in everyday conversation. Personal histories, attitudes, and beliefs become exposed for all to see, placing the artist in a naked—vulnerable position. Sometimes things are difficult to talk about that needs a space of understanding, and there is a point in any form of relationship with another person where you need to accept them for who they are and not who you want them to be.

Esther Neff's performance, *The Scraping Shape of the Socially Cyclomythic Womb* was one of the first performances in the festival to consciously use her voice to acknowledge the crowd, breaking the wall between the audience and the formal *performance*. Talking, or using the voice in performance art seems like it is taboo, where a majority of the work in performances is done mute, but this is normal in Neff's work, whether performing solo or in the group Panoply Lab, using the voice is a recurring aspect of her work.

She begins the performance wearing black clothes, and saying aloud "I have a body," and "we have a body." She says this repeatedly as if chanting or in song while walking around the space, defining the space as the crowd begins to enter. There is a large piece of plywood leaning against the wall, and on one side of the room is a sewing machine and on the other side is a power-saw.

Social constructions has placed gender signifiers on these objects giving them a cultural symbolic weight to them before they are even used: advertising and Western society presents the saw as masculine and the sewing machine as feminine, but a saw is just a saw and it is us who places the word masculine or feminine on the object. In her performance, Neff firmly destroys any gender signifiers these objects may have had.

Picking up the plywood, she asks for two strong volunteers to help her. Two women stand up and hold the wood. Neff gives them instruction of how to hold it so she can start using to the to carve it with the saw: when she is done, the plywood is in the form of a giant female genital tract. During the course of performance, Neff breaks out of her "performing persona" and casually acknowledges the crowd, thanking them for their help.

Neff then begins chanting "You're just a model," aloud, and hands a woman a spool of black thread; it is cut, and then she heads to the sewing machine, turning it on. She takes a piece of black fabric, rips it in half, and repeatedly puts it through the sewing machine; she holds it up each time showing that the fabric is not sewn together.

She begins handing out post-cards with tape on them to people in the room and asks them to place them anywhere in the room."Does the object control the body?" she asks each person. The post-cards have a kitsch image of a "typical" man, standing in pajamas, smoking a pipe and reading a newspaper. Neff has written phrases on the cards like "Our sense is our weakness," or "Our unity is a wasted womb." The card also shows a flow of blood coming from his boxer shorts.

Now completely undressed save for her shoes, Neff opens up a plain paper bag, and takes out black ink, sterile needles, and anti-septic wipes: it becomes clear that she's going to tattoo herself. She asks for more volunteers to hold the plywood, and four

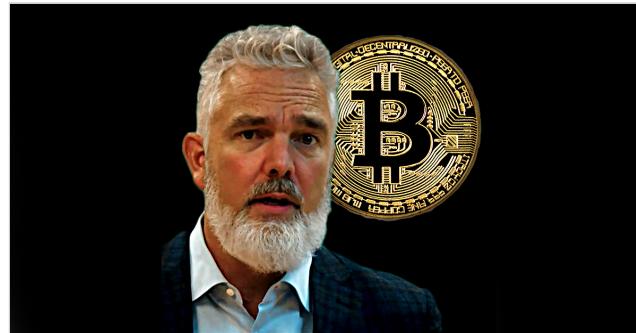
women step up: because it is too heavy, more people join in.

Neff ties a needle the tip of the plywood and gives the volunteers instructions on what to do. She wants them to rock back and forth and have the needle prick her stomach, tattooing her in the process. She draws a mark to aim for on her chest; it is in the shape of a drop of blood. The whole room chants “I have a body...We have a body,” rocking back and forth, creating the tattoo. After several minutes she then goes alone repeatedly stabbing herself with a new needle, finishing the tattoo, and continuing the phrase, while now adding “we had a body.” Without saying it directly, Neff makes everyone aware exactly what she’s talking about; this type of accomplishment takes an incredible amount of skill and understanding of your materials and your body in a space.

Her repetition of words took on new meanings based on the context of her actions and the tone of her voice. When she repeated “I have a body”, in the beginning it sounded like a unifying fact we all share, that the identity of the body is of self, not societal-ownership, but—near the end of the performance when she started repeating the same words, I felt there was a wave of sadness to them, now creating a connotation of acceptance for the self—regardless of what difficult circumstances or trauma it has been through. The tattoo (or scar) is a permanent reminder of the performance, but also a physical reminder of that history or memory.

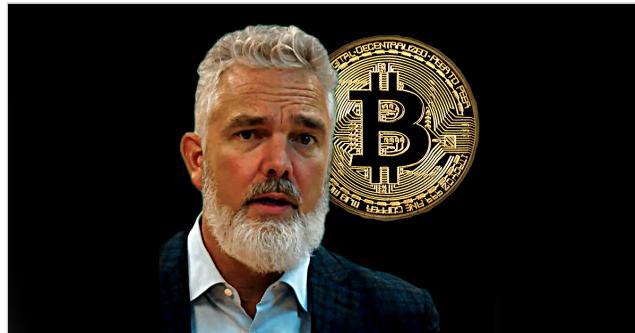
Afterwards Neff dissolved the intensity of the performance, speaking in a calm voice stating she is done and thanking everyone; she wrapped a bandage around her stomach, began to clean up her materials, and asked if anyone wanted to keep a postcard. Neff discussed earlier in a talk at the Live Art Development Agency that she had experienced several miscarriages in her lifetime; this coolness after such an intense moment and vulnerable performance takes an incredible amount of control that can only be looked at with admiration.

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