



Clementine Cumber. video stills from *Stair Roll*, 2002

A Conversation with Clementine Cumber

OLIVER LUTZ

Oliver: Can you talk about how you became involved in dance and how that practice has influenced your work?

Clementine: Dance for me came before visual arts, or at least before a concept of myself as a visual artist. My first experience was with African dance and then I did a lot of improvisational dance. Then I got more into different techniques like release technique and different modern techniques... Spatial knowledge and spatial expression and performance of the self through movement is really central to my thinking. It's something that I'm forever trying to bring into my visual work.

Oliver: You had an early interest in body movement and it's occupation of space and use of space and then at a later point you become interested in objects and building installations for that?

Clementine: Well in some ways they were separate trajectories because the thing I have done even longer than dance is make objects, sewing in particular... In New York I got pretty involved in costume design for friends who were performers, I made a lot clothes for myself, I sold clothes, I learned to weave... So really the sculpture came out of wanting to make objects that were more conceptual – that had more to do with different kinds of meaning than use. And then that grew into an interest in installations and... .. everybody always said “well this feels like a stage set.” I got a lot of encouragement to perform in my installations because people knew that I had this background in dance. But my interest in movement doesn't have to with performance really, it has to do with this experience of being through the body – which isn't a performance per se, no more than walking down the street is a performance. It's how we learn about the world through our bodies – through being more sensitive thru the body, how you communicate through your body.

Oliver: So you'd say that when doing your own work & it incorporates use of your own body you're not thinking about it as a staged performance but instead as something more internal?

Clementine: I guess maybe *experimental* is a good word for it – the work has been interpreted performatively or as a document of a performance – and that's not really my interest. So a lot of what I've been doing in the past few years is figure out how to work with the camera so as to

articulate something about the impossibility of recording bodily experience. If I could redo *Stair Roll* now it wouldn't be a single camera watching me roll down the stairs – it might be a whole bunch of cameras that are positioned one on each stair so that they get a moment of what's happening & then there's this sound of me narrating my physical experience of what I'm doing while I'm doing it, so that the emphasis is on the knowing of a physical experience or what it is to know – like, “ok now the pressure on my head is this” – so that emphasis is on what the physical experience is as opposed to the drama of watching somebody do something weird.

Oliver: And you think that as it was documented in, I believe a single shot, that the activity within the frame becomes dramatic? How is the experience as represented in the final footage changed as a result of the filmic techniques used, as a mediated event?

Clementine: I am trying to find ways of editing and of working with the video camera that make the viewer more attentive to or more affected by the fact that what they are watching is mediated. I want to expose the gap between direct perception and mediated perception...

Oliver: Did you ever think of doing instructions, printing instruction sets?



Clementine Cumber. video stills from *Tub Roll*, 2002

Clementine: Instructions? That's really interesting. Where I'm trying to develop right now – and I might include visuals, but right now I'm trying to narrate instructions. So that you as an audience would experience a recorded narration of a physical act – with somewhat of an ambiguity as to whether I'm describing something that I'm seeing or that I'm encouraging you to do something. I'm giving you the info about what to pay attention to, where your weight is, what limb you're using, where your orientation is to the room. I taught yoga for a long time & what you do as a yoga instructor is narrate a body experience. You sometimes demonstrate but mostly what I did was walk around & narrate. So that people – for themselves – they're not making sense of their body by looking at what somebody else's body, at my body, they're making sense by trying to interpret the words and then the sensations that they're experiencing and whether that description matches – so as a teacher you're trying to give a description that's compelling enough that actually allows somebody to find that sensation or a similar sensation for themselves.

Oliver: What strikes me about *Stair Roll* and also *Tub Roll* is that your body is subject to some type of movement that I personally find very uncomfortable – the spaces have hard surfaces and are cornered or cramped. What is it about that kind of space or surface that interests you and also the work that you're doing now would that be incorporated into any sort of narration or instruction?

Clementine: I think that part of my interest in that is that if there's a difficulty in doing a movement it involves a different kind of presence than if you're doing something that's easy – like if you're doing something that's familiar and easy, like walking across the room, the presence, the attention, that's required to do it is not very much. You could be doing something

else in your head. Whereas if you're doing a really difficult movement you have to be completely present for it, all your attention has to be on that thing, on that movement. And the effort involved to do it, the precision involved to do it, the agility. So that it focuses – I like movement that focuses me – on doing that movement and not, my mind than becomes attentive, as opposed to distracted. And that I think is really interesting because then you actually notice your body whereas most of the time you don't notice your body.

Oliver: Are you familiar with Minsky's writing on pain?¹

Clementine: He's a scientist right, a neuroscientist?

Oliver: Yeah, artificial intelligence and neuroscience... He makes an interesting point about pain –

Clementine: That pain makes you pay attention?

Oliver: Yeah, he makes the case that being in pain is probably one of the most focused states that a person can experience.

Clementine: It's actually a component of a lot of physical practices – yoga is difficult. It's difficult because by being difficult, you have to pay attention. If it was easy you wouldn't have to pay attention. You would wander. The physical difficulty of something is interesting to me. It's engaging. It kind of gets more at something that's satisfying. It's a process of actually learning something. And also with that work, like on the stairs, I think the other component that is related is vulnerability. If you are doing something with your body & you feel vulnerability not only do you pay more attention, but other people pay more attention. It's a more interesting state of the body, it's a new territory, a territory where new knowledge can happen.

Oliver: What's more interesting about it for a viewer?

Clementine: I think because vulnerability makes people uncomfortable. It makes them more aware of their own vulnerability, of their own body.

Oliver: Right. I'm reminded of another media lab character, Dan Ariely, who writes also about pain, about discomfort, and learning – that pain can be a great tool for learning – that it's a very engaging state to experience. He talks about Mountaineers climbing that if you ask one at any time if they were enjoying it, that while in this suffered state they would have to say in that in that immediate moment, "no," but will they do it again? "Yes," because it's something that gives them some sort of meaning out of that struggle. What I'm wondering is for a viewer, at what point does that viewing experience allow for an assimilation of that – your own experience – without really having the challenge of it? And is this really an issue for you in your work?

Clementine: I think it's totally an issue. And it's particularly an issue with the camera. Right? Because it gets back to that question of what's voyeurism, can you feel somebody else's experience without actually living it... If my interest is in embodiment, how can it possibly be enough for somebody to sit there and contemplate somebody else's embodiment without actually having to experience it...

¹ See Minsky, Marvin (1985). *The Society of the Mind*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Oliver: What then is the difference between the visual and the instructed audio/auditory?

Clementine: I think that the visual tends to give people an ideal, like an icon, it tends to so quickly be reduced to image rather than sensation. When you hear something you have to actually translate it, you do the mediating. It's not, as you said, completely digested for you. I thought that I could work with live cameras in that way in a way that asked people to get involved, so that it wasn't digested material that they were getting they were asked to be part of an experience.

Oliver: Is that what you were doing in *Personal Surveillance Practice*?



Clementine Cummer. *Personal Surveillance Practice*, 2004

Clementine: Yes, but I am not sure how successful it was. I think peoples' experience is about looking at themselves, or not wanting to look at themselves. It's about looking... In this piece the focus is on the mediation, and the technique of the mediation, – we construct ourselves through language and we const ourselves thru looking, these are two processes of mediation. And maybe what I'm trying to get at is what we also do is const ourselves thru sensation, that there's a kind of a learning & a self-awareness and a subjection that is from the inside out- that isn't from the outside in.

Oliver: Do you think an artist today has a responsibility to the society that they live in? Do you think about how your work relates to society?

Clementine: Sure. For me making art is all about engaging w/ a larger world. I deeply believe that being in the world physically and creatively is subversive or is political or is anti-establishment. It's probably one of the more radical things you could do – is to be actually be sensate in this world.