

Toronto – University of Toronto Art Centre, Political Poetics

73 - [Intercourse: Art as transaction \(/en/revue/intercourse\)](#)

Toronto

[Gabrielle Moser \(/en/auteurs/gabrielle-moser\)](#)



Suzy Lake, Political Poetics University of Toronto Art Centre, Toronto, April 30–June 25, 2011

For its contribution to this year's CONTACT Photography Festival, the University of Toronto Art Centre took on the challenge of surveying the past forty years of Suzy Lake's prolific output in both film and photography. Taking stock of an "underappreciated" aspect of Lake's practice – her use of formal aesthetics to communicate political content – *Political Poetics* focuses on the relationship between figure and ground in the celebrated performance artist's work. A concept put forth by cultural theorist Marshall McLuhan to explain the relationship between a medium (the figure) and its social context (the ground), the figure-ground model also served as the theme for this year's city-wide festival. In Lake's exhibition, curated by Matt Brower and Carla Garnet, the concept is mapped (sometimes unsuccessfully) onto the connection between image and identity in the artist's practice.

This is rich ground to investigate Lake's work, as the show's earliest pieces make clear. Employing the minimalist aesthetic associated with conceptual performance work, Lake's projects often focus on the figure of the artist as she struggles with, or against, the ground of her environment. In *Choreographies on the Dotted Line* (1976), for instance, a projected black and white video shows Lake on the floor, rolling herself into a long white sheet marked with a dotted black line. Panting with the exertion of making precise movements without the use of her limbs, Lake forces her body to stay in line with the predetermined dots. Nearby, a grid of black and white photographs also shows Lake rolling and falling, this time down a flight of stairs in *Vertical Pull* (1977). Using sequential images as an extended stop-motion animation, the three columns of photographs show Lake being pulled towards the bottom of the picture plane by a rope tied around her waist. In both works, Lake adheres to arbitrary and potentially dangerous rules about how she manipulates her body, to comment on issues of embodiment and subjectivity.

But while these early performances employ the lone figure of the artist as a central trope, Lake's photographic works are more nuanced, treating identity as cultural text (evinced by the room dedicated to several iterations of her 1972–75 *On Stage* series, which combines eighty-four photographs and texts that meditate on role-playing and self-projection) and as durational performance (made clear through her most recent project, *Extended Breathing* (2008–present), which uses hour-long exposures to blurrily depict the artist's act of breathing while standing in lush garden landscapes). Here, the artist's experiments with embodiment hone in on photography's capacities and limitations as a medium, attempting to depict ongoing processes through single, still images. Taken together, Lake's sustained engagements with photography exceed their curatorial frame, offering subtle surprises for viewers. Above all, the exhibition attests to the need for further curatorial investigations into the breadth and diversity of her work.

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