

performance/art/film  
by penelope mulligan

# strut, fret and flicker

**SEAMLINE: An Invocation of Energy Through Tattoo**  
Wednesday, October 15  
Hastings Art Gallery

If performance art can be described as the transformation of an action into art through performance, then **Julianna Barabas** is pulling it off in a most elegant and ingenious way. She is undertaking, in twelve monthly sessions, to mark her body with a tattoo which will bisect it into front and back. This "seamline" began at her left shoulder, travelled down her arm, up the inside to the armpit, down her torso and leg, under her foot...you get the picture. The circuit will be complete when the line has traversed the top of her head. The installment I witnessed (#6) was called *The Bridge*, because it was the one in which the seam crossed from one side of her body to the other via a tapeworm-like spiral design over her pubic bone.

The cosy storefront gallery where it took place was an island of light and warmth in the rainy Strathcona night and attendees were welcomed like guests who'd popped 'round for dinner. Undercutting the casual ambience like a sinister reminder of why we had come, was a white-sheeted tattooist's couch in the centre of the room. Barabas' cheerful trepidation was obviously genuine—she had already endured five sessions of this on some excruciatingly tender parts of her body—and she responded honestly to the ensuing pain, neither performing it, nor attempting to stare it down. (At one point, she commented that we ought to have as many different words for pain's nuances as Eskimos do for snow.) Inviting friends and strangers to watch seemed less like a desire to perform than to deepen her own psychological engagement.

In many ways, the event had the atmosphere of a home birth—

right down to the snacks and libations, supportive presence of mates, photo documentation, tattoo artist-as-midwife and, of course, the spread eagled principal player whose "caretaker" coached and comforted her throughout the process. In fact, the most formal element was Gretchen Eisler's live accompaniment on viola. A lighthearted and humorous beginning with Beethoven's Ode to Joy soon gave way to more lugubrious bowing and squeaking which battled with the relentless buzzing of the tattoo gun. It was an interesting sonic effect, but didn't feel terribly connected with what was happening on the couch.

Body modification is no stranger to performance art, but whereas it's often self-administered, confrontational and statement-driven (as in the work of Yugoslavia's Marina Abramovic), it's the goal in itself for Barabas. Complex and deeply personal as her need for the tattoo might be, she would only say that "conceptually, the line has always been there. It was just a matter of making it visible." In this sense, *seamline* is more akin to the decade-long plastic surgery project of French artist Orlan. Though enormously more radical (and "performed" only on film), Orlan's undertaking was, in essence, very goal-directed and also involved a practitioner (in this case, surgeon-as-artist).

For an audience, *seamline* can fascinate, intrigue and even repel, but its most enduring value might be as metaphor—our goals and desires can demand much of us as we try to realize them. The seam lengthens at 8pm on November 19 (478 Union Street) as part of **LIVE Biennial of Performance Art**.

## THE PLUGHOLE

What happens in a world where everything has become commodified, including human interaction? One possible answer lies in the title of a play which opens here later this month. **Shopping and Fucking** has been a massive hit in Europe, New York and playwright Mark Ravenhill's native UK, where it premiered back in 1996. Interestingly enough, it's also been huge in Russia, where western-style capitalism charged in a few seconds after the collapse of the Soviet empire.

Pi Theatre's Del Surjik, who co-directs the piece with Diane Brown of Ruby Slippers, knows that Vancouver's theatre scene can be isolated and stresses the importance of producing works that have been rocking audiences elsewhere on the planet. Tracking three Londoners as they look for a home and family in a world made vacuous and abrasive by consumerism, the play has been called "witty, shocking, poetic" and "the vanguard of the New British Theatre."

This production also has some genre-bending innovations. DJ Jason White—aka Honey Bee—will mix the music and soundscape live, while David Roberts' set design is so hot that Brown and Surjik went stumm when asked about it ("It's a secret. It's never been done before"). Brown did want you to know, however, that we can drink in our seats and lig around afterwards. All told, it sounds like this one has a lot more going for it than just a catchy name. \*

**Runs November 21-December 6 at Performance Works on Granville Island. Tks and Info: 604-257-0366.**

*Anna Cummer and Robert Moloney get down to some Shopping and Fucking*

