

**Irene Loughlin (In conversation with Naufus Ramirez–Figueroa),
"Life In His Mouth, Death Cradles Her Arm," SLITS Catalogue,
Western Front, 2006**

In the performance *Life in his Mouth, Death Cradles her Arm*, Naufus Ramirez–Figueroa motionlessly supported a bundle of ice wrapped in a blanket that represented a child. The ice slowly melted through contact with the heat of his body. Water seeped into his overcoat during the melting process, and eventually dripped onto the plastic floor. The work contained an operatic quality, in that Ramirez–Figueroa stood as a solitary, central figure within the performance space, his body illuminated by a single light bulb. He gazed down at the bundle in his arms for the duration of the performance. The work explored the concept of pain, and in particular, the emotional consequences of loss.

Situated as part of the Performance Series SLITS, the performance took place inside a makeshift cubicle formed from sheets of plastic. The plastic sheets also acted as a type of curtain enclosure through which the viewers peered at the performer. Slits cut in the plastic offered the viewers a limited perspective of the performance interior. The voyeurism inherent in this environment of partial viewing created an inversion of what is often a prevailing sentiment of trepidation towards the performance artist's frequent unpredictability. Performance actions are often rooted in the 'shock value' methodologies of the avant garde, and are consequently executed via the disintegration of the fourth wall, thus violating the theatrical convention of a safe distance and separation between artist and viewer. In this interesting inversion of viewer/artist discomfort, curator Victoria Singh reconstructs a rather flimsy fourth wall that privileges the viewer position.

Paradoxically, it was now the performance artist that experienced a heightened fear of the viewer. This fear was emphasized by his own view of disembodied viewers from where he stood. The artist reported that at times he felt as if he was alone in the space, until he suddenly caught a pair of eyes looking at him, or two eyes darting around the space and then suddenly disappearing. In one instance, a viewer attempted to climb into the space with him by forcing open a greater gap in the material. He felt discomfited and experienced the enclosed area as "claustrophobic." Standing inside this feeble structure which offered the false promise of a

safely delineated performance space, he felt instead that the proscenium arch bore down on him, caging him within the space. Viewers commented to each other about the work as if he could not hear them. He felt that this must mean that they were comfortable in their voyeuristic position, and oblivious to his own experience of suffering.

The endurance aspect of this work caused his arms to become very heavy. A day later, he reported that his arms still ached as if he had actually held a child for the duration of the performance, and he felt a similar sensation of physical exhaustion as that inherent in caring for a young child. For Ramirez-Figueroa, the performance continued over the next day as he carried this sensation in his body. Standing relatively still for two hours was a difficult task. In reviewing the video documentation of the work, he was surprised by the aspect of swaying assumed by his body. He noticed the subtle jerking back and forth, which he described as similar to that of "playing back a cassette tape...a subtle motion that was unconscious."

The work also assumed an aesthetic and historic nostalgia reminiscent of tableau vivant. Before the age of colour reproduction of images, the tableau vivant was used to recreate paintings through a live aspect. The tableau vivant also constructed a narrative that did not require theatrical conventions. Tableau vivant has integrated well with performative practice, as both are derivative of a visual art tradition. In 19th century Latin American Mestizo upper and middle class urban culture, the response to the death of a child was reconstructed to support a detached and suppressed emotional perspective. The loss of a child was aestheticized through gentle metaphors, poems, and drawings of weeping willows and angels. Traditions surrounding the child's death positioned and dressed the baby as an angel for the funeral, and celebrated the child's transcendence to the other life where it would arrive unpolluted into the kingdom of heaven. In Mexico, children are hired a year after a child's death to surround a makeshift coffin dressed as angels, where they enact an allegory of the child's passing. Through these modern rituals, Mestizo culture echoed colonial European values, which positioned grieving as a gesture.

In the performance, Ramirez-Figueroa exposed the influence of voyeurism on expressions of grief. A relationship was struck between grieving and theatre. The presence of the viewer's gaze was felt and registered out of the corner of the performance artist's eye while he was frozen in the tableau vivant. He was intent on the body of the child that ephemerally melts from his embrace. He held the reality of loss, as when a baby dies in childbirth or is still born. Consequently the family never sees the child's body. Death is made invisible by convention. The limitations imposed by masculinity upon expressions of grief were also held in the frozen quality of the artist's body. The performance created by Ramirez-Figueroa of a man cradling a child is also an uncommon aesthetic image. One viewer commented that the melting child seemed to her as a weeping bundle in his arms.