

*we sat rigid  
except for the parts  
of our bodies  
that were needed for  
production*

SANDRA LAHIRE  
CELESTE BURLINA

09/04 – 29/05/2022

“We are honed to tolerate boring work. The hundred letter words emerging like alphabet soup, like faces in a funhouse mirror, feeling more and more distorted in my body. Everything around, appearing quite tiny, as if seen through a keyhole. We sat rigid, except for the parts of our bodies that were needed for production. We sat in this way, pointed to reassemble people. Lights flickering across our eyes. And propped up in attitudes, counterfeiting life,” a female voice rhythmically recites in Sandra Lahire’s *Terminals* (1986).

*we sat rigid except for the parts of our bodies that were needed for production* is an exhibition that convenes the work of the late British experimental filmmaker Sandra Lahire and the Italian artist and designer Celeste Burlina. Coming from two distinct eras of feminist practice, their piercing meditations on the porosity of the body, labor, and environmental trouble enter into joint fabulation.

*we sat rigid...* is host to six films by Lahire, of which five are newly digitized. Her galvanizing handling of the celluloid moving image addresses the ways in which capital and patriarchy mold and deplete vital faculties of the body, the earth, and ultimately the moving image itself. Her first two films, *Arroms* (1984) and *Edge* (1986), are firmly rooted in her persistent struggle with anorexia and the idealization of the female body. Together, they render a confronting account of the cultural causes of her drive towards thinness while she simultaneously seizes control over the production of her own image. *Terminals* (1986) broadens these autobiographical reflections and introduces another cycle of works—*Plutonium Blonde* (1987), *Uranium Hex* (1987), and *Serpent*

*River* (1989)—, which probes into radiation, the mining of uranium, and the social and environmental destruction that comes with it. Against the backdrop of a looming nuclear war and the disintegration of miners’ communities in the United Kingdom and elsewhere in the 1980s, she examines this atomic reality in a fractured, sensitizing fashion. Approximately 35 years later, her concerns gain traction again and put the urgent need for the political recognition of corporeal vulnerability to the fore once more.

Celeste Burlina responds by way of an architectural intervention, *carrier* (2022), which echoes Lahire’s cinematic exploration of mining, industrial production, and female labor. Attentive to the ways infrastructure enables or obstructs the gathering of bodies and their circulation, Burlina’s proposition cuts through the three galleries of the Kunstverein. Starting off as a deceptive proposition reminiscent of minimalist sculpture, the work transforms and develops in function and meaning as it carries along. Oscillating between the functional and ornamental, *carrier* both serves as a support structure for Lahire’s moving image and interrogates the body of the Kunstverein as such. Burlina, who is trained as a structural engineer, rewires the function and purposefulness of raw, technical materials—H-beams, chains, rods, bits, and methyl methacrylate sheets—and thwarts her longstanding relationship with such supplies often associated with brute, subjugating forces. As Lahire’s films are brimming with these elements as well, Burlina performs a dialogical act and seeks to undo the rigidity these materials propose while insisting on their potential for powerful transformation.

What is called into being is a sensuous dialogue beyond the limitations of linear time—a resonant space sustained by two voices in fervent inclination.

1. *URANIUM HEX*, 1987

16 mm film, Color, Magnetic, 11 minutes

An exploration of uranium mining in Canada, *Uranium Hex* investigates the dangers involved in the extraction of radioactive materials. By way of a dense superimposition of acid-colored celluloid and local speech, Lahire gives voice to workers who continuously expose themselves to the highly contaminating materials extracted for electricity generation, nuclear warfare, and medical purposes. “Exposure was so intense in the uranium mines it was like lying under an X-ray machine day and night,” one of the workers testifies. *Uranium Hex*, insisting on the entanglement of labor, ecology, and the military-industrial complex, depicts the vulnerable body too. Dressed up as a mineworker, Lahire looks into the camera while, at other times, her gaunt spine intersects a visual landscape of drilling marks, penetrated rock, and rescue services. At the junction of voice, body, industry, and the experimental treatment of the moving image, a brazen visualization of the invisible force of radioactive “power”—in the multiple meanings the term embodies—materializes.

2. *PLUTONIUM BLONDE*, 1987

16 mm film, Color, Opt., 16 minutes

*Plutonium Blonde* follows Thelma, a woman who operates monitors in a nuclear reactor. Borrowing its title from a color description of beauty products, the film brings the production of atomic energy and femininity in conjunction. Mixing promotional footage by the Atomic Energy Authority with clandestinely filmed shots of the nuclear reactor at Winfrith (Dorset, United Kingdom), *Plutonium Blonde* renders the body of a nuclear power plant in its daily function. Produced one year after the nuclear disaster at Chernobyl (then the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic; now Ukraine), the innards of the reactor are juxtaposed with the hyper-controlled environment surrounding the radioactive cores. Robotic arms surgically move plutonium fuel rods while microscopic renderings of atomic fusion kaleidoscopically fill the field of vision. Monitors, measuring devices, fences, police forces, and bird’s-eye view helicopter shots underscore the control mechanisms and high-security measures that come with the industrial deployment of highly toxic substances or gendered relations alike. Here, “monitor” fully takes on its double meaning, as it speaks both to the display and visualization of an image as it does to the seizing of control. Or as Marina Grzinic puts it: “There is no difference between the politics of

the medium and the politics of the topic; both are reunited in a clash of layers within deadly light. Radioactivity is deployed as a radioactivity of the film image in itself.”

3. *TERMINALS*, 1986

16 mm film, Color, Sep Mag, 18 minutes

*Terminals* marks the beginning of Lahire’s in-depth engagement with radiation and bridges her investigation of the representation of the female body (*Arrows* and *Edge*) with her nuclear trilogy (*Uranium Hex*, *Plutonium Blonde*, and *Serpent River*). Focusing on the labor conditions of women working at nuclear power plants, Lahire explores the corporeal vulnerability produced by techno-patriarchal apparatuses. “We sat rigid, except for the parts of our bodies that were needed for production,” a female voice rhythmically recites, describing work with the monitors that visualize radioactivity. Women’s voices recount the harmful effects of nuclear exposure and other kinds of radiation such as cancer, loss of vision, mutation, and ultimately death. The connection between vision and radiation becomes apparent as the film itself is treated as a body, too. Repeatedly, the celluloid is over-exposed, edging toward the destruction of the image itself. Shots from the power station in the coastal town of Dungeness (where Lahire’s friend Derek Jarman would live in the Prospect Cottage from 1987 onwards), are juxtaposed with men fishing in polluted waters. Blurring the lines between documentary and experimental film, Lahire subverts the ideal of objectivity and linearity within documentary filmmaking, as she places her own body in the image—a site where the vectors of oppression meet.

4. *ARROWS*, 1984

16 mm film, Color, Opt., 15 minutes

Lahire’s first film, *Arrows*, is an autobiographical account of her enduring struggle with anorexia. By way of rostrum work (a technique to animate still pictures, photographs, cut-outs, or objects) and live-action, the film renders both her drive towards thinness and the cultural causes that underpin it. The line, the grid, the train track, and the (rib-)cage appear as metaphorical and structural elements; they keep the body static, captive, and in place. Regime and domination are juxtaposed with expressions of the complex psychology of such internalized and embodied oppression. Lahire’s voice appears several times as she takes

on different roles. “I don’t want to hide it anymore,” she says, voicing a letter by Kate, a 17-years old and fellow sufferer of anorexia. Drenched in sarcasm, Lahire performs the voice of a cosmetic surgeon who describes fat removal procedures. Then, in a desperate phone call to a therapy center, Lahire expresses her feeling of abandonment. “I can’t keep talking to these machines,” she utters. Later, a man instructs fitness exercises to keep the body fit and lean. The voice of the American poet Sylvia Plath, whose work systematically appears in Lahire’s films, reads lines from *The Thin People* (1957), her poem on Jewish experience during WWII. As such, Lahire draws transhistorical lines in thinking about who comes to bear the traces of oppression. Seizing control over the production of her own image, Lahire steps into the image herself. She films herself in the mirror, elbows fluttering like wings.

5. *SERPENT RIVER*, 1989

16 mm film, Color, Stereo, 30 minutes

*Serpent River* is the last and most extensive part of Lahire’s trilogy on nuclear power. The film is shot in Serpent River First Nation, an Anishinaabe First Nation in the Canadian province of Ontario and the location of a uranium mining site owned by the Anglo-Australian corporation Rio Tinto Zinc. Accumulating an abundance of local voices, the actively invisibilized poisonous side effects of radiation are rendered audible and visible. *Serpent River* draws particular attention to the ways such pollution affects the indigenous communities surrounding the mine more than others. Shots of mining operations are interspersed with documentary footage of the women and children of the Serpent River community. By way of intense colorization and the layering of multiple images, Lahire reveals the whirling river as a site where environmental landscape intersects with social and political landscape too. Then again, Lahire, dressed up in a combination of snow and mining gear, appears in the image herself and blends with the environment she portrays. As the Brazilian filmmaker Ana Vaz notes: “[...] Sandra weaves these perspectives through her own, becoming her own miner. Excavating layers upon layers, heading far underground until arriving at a space where language is not sufficient and neither is a single image.”

6. *EDGE*, 1986

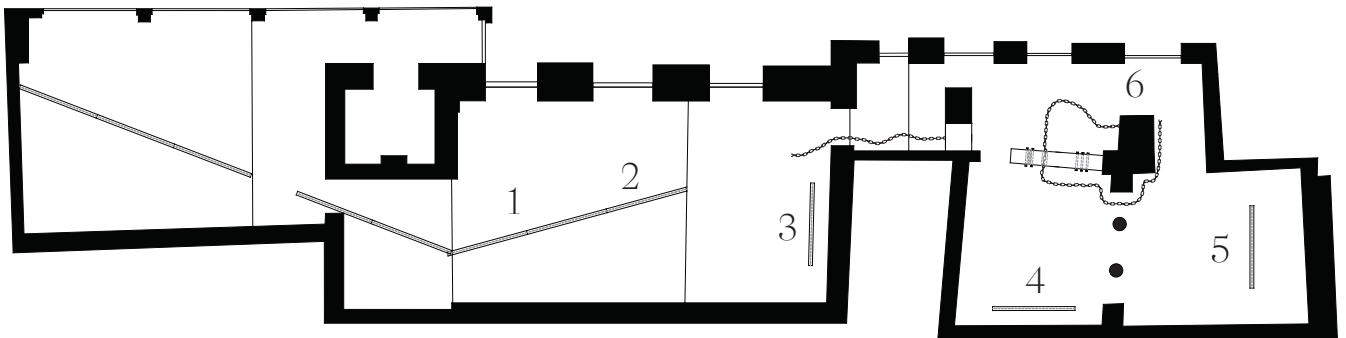
16 mm film, Color, Stereo, 12 minutes

Laden with visceral imagery, *Edge* depicts fragmented body parts, violence inflicted on animals, and animations of surgical procedures with gauze, scalpels, scissors, and stitches at dazzling speed. Whereas *Arrows* focuses on the cultural constituents of the drive towards thinness, *Edge* zooms in on the medical apparatus and how it shapes and invades the body. By way of simulation, a gruesome moving image is composed that shows the “inside” of a beautified female surface and how it is supported by scientific and technological aspirations. *Edge* meditates on the production of the female image, as much as it engages with the reproductive faculties of the female body. The perfect woman can only be created with the scalpel of a gifted sculptor: maternal, smiling, dead. As Lahire’s face, mouth agape, alternates with the image of a cat’s head, she establishes an emphatic bond between woman and animal and suggests them alike in their suffering. Taking its title from Sylvia Plath’s last poem, *Edge* channels the voice of Plath herself as she reads sections of her own poetry that underscore the forces that female bodies are subjected to.

*All films: Courtesy of the artist and LUX, London.*

SANDRA LAHIRE (1950–2001, United Kingdom) was a feminist experimental filmmaker. Her artistic legacy includes ten 16 mm films in which she explores the body’s vulnerability. Lahire’s oeuvre investigates the representation of the (female) body and how it comes to bear traces of socio-political and ecological collapse. Lahire was a central member of London’s experimental filmmaking community in the 1980s and 1990s and was involved with the London Film-Makers’ Co-op and the London-based feminist film and video distributors Circles and Cinenova. Her essay “Lesbians in Media Education” was published in *Visibly Female* in 1987. In 1993, she composed a musical score for *Just About Now* by the British artist and filmmaker Lis Rhodes. Lahire studied Philosophy at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne, Fine Art Film at St Martins School of Art, and Film & Environmental Media at the Royal College of Art in London. She passed away after an enduring struggle with anorexia.

CELESTE BURLINA (b. 1988, Italy; lives in Berlin) works as an artist, designer, and writer. Her exhibition designs and scenographies articulate the relationship between people and infrastructure and focus on the dramaturgy of attention and attending. She developed made-to-measure installations and spatial interventions for “trust & confusion” at Tai Kwun Contemporary, Hong Kong (2021), “30 Years of KW: Anniversary Weekend” (2021) at KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin (2021), Creamcake’s 3rd Festival “Power Play” at Park Center Treptow, Berlin (2021), and “im garten der blicke” at Kunsthaus NRW Kornelimünster, Aachen (2020). Previously, Burlina worked for the design and architecture studio Sub, with whom she completed projects for exhibitions by Anne Imhof at Castello di Rivoli (Turin), Tate Modern (London), and Palais de Tokyo (Paris), as well as for Schinkel Pavillon (Berlin) and Balenciaga. Burlina is a Doctor of Engineering.



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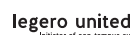
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