

# FrameWork 2/18

Lauren Fournier on Althea Thauberger

## *the reparative practice of re-performing*

Legend:

--> performativity<sup>i</sup>  
~~~ interpellation<sup>ii</sup>

### *(a) re-performing*

In *Althea Lorraine*, Althea Thauberger stages a performative intervention into the NFB's archives, fixating on the figure of Lorraine Althea Monk.

The artist sees herself in her, maybe: her name sandwiched between this historical figure's first name and surname: Althea.<sup>iii</sup> A point of connection. It's not the only one. Both are women, both have worked as producers and directors of a sort, in different contexts and in different ways. Lorraine Monk was the executive producer of the NFB's still image division circa 1967: she developed "The People Tree" for Expo 67's Canadian Pavilion in Montreal. And now, fifty years later, we reach another point of nationalistic relevance: the sesquicentennial. Artists revolt, protest, subvert. Althea Thauberger develops the film *L'arbre est dans ses feuilles* (*The tree is in its leaves*), which is shown in Montreal in the MAC's 2017 exhibition *In Search of Expo 67*.

Lorraine Monk, this figure of white womanhood, of nation-building, of middle-class Canadiana. She's *problematic* and we're *paranoid*.<sup>iv</sup> Objects like grey cards, a work desk, a glass ceiling. Monk's eyes looking downward, then up: at least she gets to see.

Althea is attuned to the rhythms of re-performing. This is an integral part of her practice: re-performing, re-casting. Now, Althea moves from her place behind the camera, from her role as director, to the role of director-actor, director-artist, she begins to pose.

There is something reparative about the practice of re-performing; there is something reparative about performativity. The iterability of performativity: how repetition engenders the possibility of difference, of subversion, of trans-formation. Feminist artists, especially those working conceptually and with their bodies, have long known this. They intuited that self-imaging exceeds "narcissism" to become something else: constituting the self in relation to others. The self in relation to the other.

As a practice, self-imaging takes place over time: it preserves the self while destabilizing it.

It makes the self less coherent, less singular.

In conversation with Thauberger, curator Andrea Kunard describes the instability and mobility of the archive: she's speaking of this specific archive (NFB Still Images 1963-1966) but she could just as well be speaking of "the archive."

There is something generous about ambivalence. In *Althea Lorraine*, Lorraine Monk does not become a scapegoat (white women make such a wonderful scapegoat). On the contrary, she becomes incorporated into the body of the artist: both her identity and the identity of Thauberger are transformed into something else, this other entity:

“Althea Lorraine”

It sounds a bit like a sixties dish, something that might be served in *The Bell Jar*. By incorporating director/producer Lorraine Althea Monk and her outmoded politic into her own contemporary artist body, Thauberger re-animates Monk.

Lorraine Monk was a feminist

. . . *Now discuss amongst yourselves.*

In her context and in her time, Monk embodied a certain view of women’s empowerment: specifically, women’s empowerment in their careers. Working in the archives at a time when those professional spaces were dominated by men, Monk had ascended the governmentally-corporate institutional structures of the NFB to become Executive Producer and director of projects that were, at the time, breaking new ground. But for whom was the ground being broken? Were these projects *artistic* or were they *propaganda* (or were they both?)

***(b) call them Canadians***

During her time with the National Film Board, Lorraine Monk produced several photography books, including: *Call Them Canadians (CTC)* and *Ces visages qui sont un pays*. “Ces visages qui sont un pays” translates roughly as “These faces that are a country.” The difference in translation sheds light on the difference in perspective between Anglophones and Francophones, both colonizing, both making a home on colonized land.

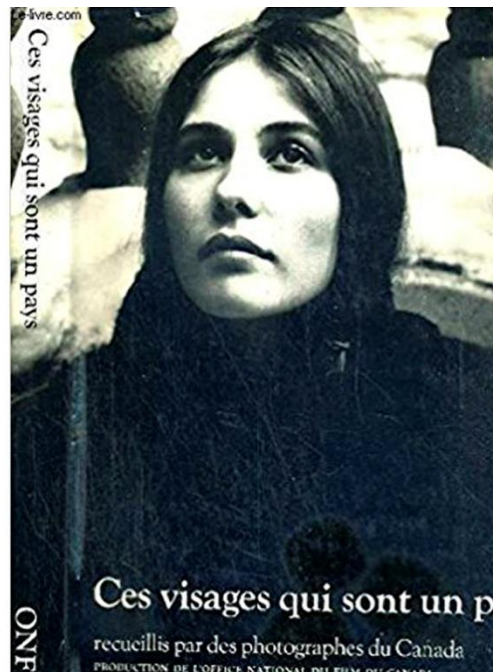
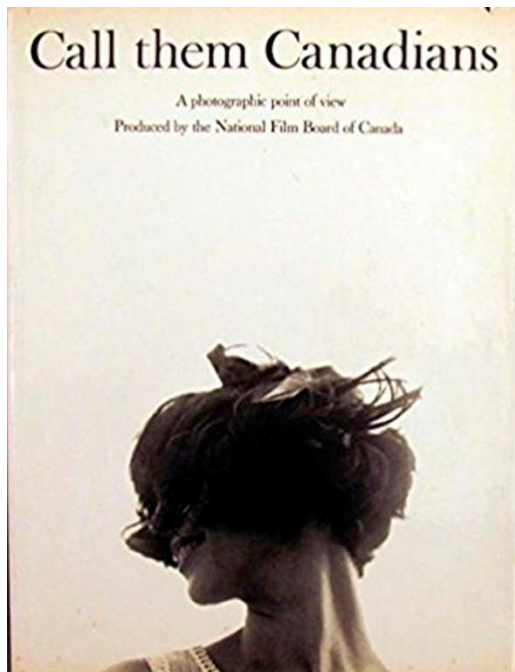
*Meaning is language and language is culture and culture is consequential.*

*Call them Canadians*: there’s a familiar ring to it, like “let them eat cake”— or is it more like Adam, naming all of the creatures of creation with the divine permission (of God, of National Institutions), saying “this is a cow” and “this is a pig” and “this is a woman made from my rib.”

It is textbook **interpellation**:v

You hail me ~ ~ ~ I am interpellated.

Lorraine Monk ~ ~ ~ > me/us - - - > Canadians  
^Institutions (governmental, cultural)



*when we call you turn/ around please and/ don't look so/ surprised<sup>vi</sup>*

Published in 1968, the English language book foregrounds photographs from the NFB's still image division alongside original works by poet Miriam Waddington.

Poeticizing the Canadian nation-building project: it's almost too easy to problematize. All of this naive poesy, innocent talk of spring rain falls, how *we become/ the enchanted/ land of ourselves*.<sup>vii</sup>

The cruel optimism of settler-colonialism and its gazes: making settlements, looking forward.

*Winter folds a velvet ear/ and summer's silk of corn/ reflects in autumns russet eye/ the skeleton of a thorn.*

The pastoral in lyric form. Little white punk boys with no shirts. Nymph-like white women sitting naked in flower beds. Men playing guitar, men playing pool. An old man in a rocking chair, holding a gun, reflective. Soft gaze. Mouths smiling, mouths smoking.

*Let darkness stay and in the mirror deepen/ward daylight off lest sun/like a cruel painter seize/ the honest stuff of morning to  
erase/us shadowy illusory and other.*

The photographs are performative and aspirational: they reflect back what we want to see, or what we *ought* to see, ourselves smiling, coming together, ourselves moving through public, united across our differences.

I continue to read Waddington's poems, these shamelessly florid poems, these romanticizing of nation-building poems, and then—a shift happens. On page 229. The poet, once complicit in her making-pastoral and making-lyric of the colonial project that is Canada, has her consciousness raised. A feminist emerges: the feminist of Margaret Atwood circa 1969 *The Edible Woman*, or the feminist of Adrienne Rich in the early 1970s. Waddington writes:

*There is a man who calls me wife/ who knows me but does not know my life/ and my two sons who call me mother/ see me not as  
any other/ yet if the fabric of my day/ should be unwound and fall away/ what colored skeins would carelessly/ unwind where I live  
secretly?*

First her consciousness is raised to see the ways that *she* is *called* in her personal life: how oppressive it is to be interpellated *as wife* and *as mother*. And next comes the wider raising: her insight into the interpellation of the colonial-nationalist project; these words, next to a photograph of an Indigenous elder sitting with a pipe, an Indigenous child looking over at him. The image bleeds over to the text page, as Waddington writes:

*What is this love of country and of street? It is fable it is foreign curved gables...*

And she catches herself: she gathers herself again and returns to the comforts of imagery, of landscape, of lyric abstraction, of pastoral retreat.

*regular as moons*

But the raised consciousness is still there. It's 1968, the year when the global unbinding of energies<sup>viii</sup> is happening in France and rippling out to North America, taking the forms of civil rights movements the following year.

With the epilogue comes one last hailing of edifying National Identity. The photograph: a young man sitting on his bicycle; the sun shines boldly and brightly behind him, the Canadian flag waving. Waddington's words appear one last time:

*Are we real or/ did someone invent us?*

*(c) the performativity of national identity*

Thauberger and I are both from Saskatchewan: she from Saskatoon, me from Regina. When you live in Saskatchewan, “Canadian” isn’t an identity at the forefront of your mind. You’re from the prairies, you’re a Saskatchewanian, a Roughrider fan, maybe. Regionalisms: another form that Canadian nationalism takes. Once you reach British Columbia it’s like you’ve left the country. *The Rocky Mountains reach to the sky* (translation: you forget you’re in Canada, and Canada forgets you). Regional identities take shape: you’re a west coaster, you’re from B.C.

It wasn’t until I moved to Ontario, this vast province of Canadiana-simulacra, that I realized how performative Canadian identity is. All of these symbols and images that existed in the collective imaginary through beer ads (for “Canadian beers” owned and produced by U.S. companies) existed in the real world too, were repeated ad infinitum, to constitute some kind of collective identity. The signifiers: beaver, maple leaf, hockey stick, beer, cottage, eh, middle class dream, old money, new money, plaid, passive aggressiveness, cultural amnesia. And the most metonymic of them all: mosaic (the creative symbol crafty like moms but also propaganda?)

In her performative persona of Althea Lorraine, Thauberger re-performs the Still Images archive of the National Film Board of Canada, this steadfast institution of national artistic and cultural identity: something that preserves even as it slowly reforms, transforms, includes, iterates—

*I prefer to call things propaganda and compromise, because in its harshest terms that really is what it is, Althea Thauberger says, with breath breath breath (her breath) pulsing around her.<sup>ix</sup>*

Performativity is a space of compromise: it is ripe with possibility for those situations (every situation?) in which we need to compromise.

A refresher on Butlerian **performativity**:

Performing - - - constitutes - - - > subjectivity, meaning, identity

Performing for the camera - - - > subjectivity, meaning, identity

Butler’s gender performativity becomes **national performativity**:

Photographs and grey cards - - - > the archive - - - > national identity

Thauberger turns the archive upside down: she flips it over, makes it backward. She is playing, she is smiling, she is posing, she is ... acting? *Jouets vivants*.<sup>x</sup>

On the second floor, we are greeted with Althea's smiling face. She is flipped upside down on a desk, grinning wide, her gaze meeting ours— her eyes these hysteric-happy moons. Her arms are spread out on the desk as if to hold the papers down so that they don't fly away: photography and the tricks of post-production suspend the laws of gravity and we, in turn, suspend our disbelief. She is wearing a sixties style dress with a coiffed work-day up-do and a pearl necklace. The background is chromakey green.

**(d) coda: caring**

*Call them Canadians.* Today's feminists name with different names, or eschew names altogether: calling for an end to gender (gender is over if you want it), an end to nationalism (canada 150 becomes colonialism 150, the maple leaf logo flipped on its head). As time passes, inter-generational conversation and understanding seems to be one of the many insurmountable challenges for feminism as a political, aesthetic, and ethical mode.

*I care about their care, so and I think caring is something that one generation has to pick up from another generation, Andrea Kunard says in conversation with Thauberger.*<sup>xi</sup>

Rendered in and through photographs and self-imaging practices, *Althea Lorraine* is as much a reflection on the medium of photography as it is on the politics and aesthetics of Canadian cultural production and of feminism, historically and into the present. (Conceptual art is well-positioned to remind us of the importance of context. As context changes, perspective changes.)

*They really believed in what they were doing. They dedicated their lives to that.*<sup>xii</sup>

In *Althea Lorraine* we return to the still image of this former NFB division. The moving image of video and film so central to Thauberger's practice is absent: there are no speakers with sound, no time-based media telling us stories— the cacophony of voices that constitutes *L'arbre est dans ses feuilles* is rendered in still image, in text, in inscription. The exhibition underlines how this project is a performative reflection on the medium of photography and its indexicality.

*The artist is still indebted to the support of institutions, institutions with nationalistic raison d'être (The artist would like to acknowledge the source materials from the Canadian Photography Institute at the National Gallery of Canada.) We are always already negotiating, always already moving with/in and through and in opposition to and in complicity with these institutions and structures and negotiations. It is ongoing compromise. Artists are well positioned to flesh out these spaces of compromise, to provide fresh insight, new spaces for transformation and play.*

<sup>i</sup> In the sense defined by language theorist J.L. Austin and taken up and elaborated by Judith Butler, who coined the term “gender performativity” to describe the ways in which gender is constituted through a “stylized repetition of acts” rather than some innate biological essence. See Butler’s “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution,” written in 1988.

<sup>ii</sup> In the sense defined by Louis Althusser, where “interpellation” is the process by which we are subjugated into an ideology and an ideological subject positioning. Examples of interpellation include being hailed— the policeman saying, “hey *you!*”— and being named when you are born— “it’s a *girl!*”

<sup>iii</sup> While known as Lorraine Althea Monk, her first name was actually Althea: she went by her second name Lorraine, and later became Lorraine Althea Monk. As Thauberger observes, she must have disliked the name Althea because it is rarely there ... That was another reason I was compelled to place myself as a stand in for her.

<sup>iv</sup> Where “paranoid” is a mode of reading that queer feminist affect theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, riffing on object relations psychoanalyst Melanie Klein, places in contrast to the “reparative” mode.

<sup>v</sup> We must never forget: Louis Althusser killed his wife.

<sup>vi</sup> Miriam Waddington’s final poem in *Call Them Canadians* (243).

<sup>vii</sup> Miriam Waddington poem in *Call Them Canadians*.

<sup>viii</sup> See Fredric Jameson’s “Periodizing the 60s.”

<sup>ix</sup> As stated by Althea Thauberger in *L’arbre est dans ses feuilles* (2017), echoing Lorraine Althea Monk’s statement in a 1976 interview with Lilly Koltun. Monk, Lorraine. Interviews by Lilly Koltun, CD-R. LAC, Ottawa. October, December 1976.

<sup>x</sup> Miriam Waddington poem in *Call Them Canadians* (126).

<sup>xi</sup> Andrea Kunard, Associate Curator of the Canadian Photography Institute, in Thauberger’s *L’arbre est dans ses feuilles*.

<sup>xii</sup> Andrea Kunard, Associate Curator of the Canadian Photography Institute, in Thauberger’s *L’arbre est dans ses feuilles*.