A CHAOS OF POSSIBILITIES

THE WORLD'S STRANGEST DRESSAGE SHOW, LIFE IN A LONDON SQUAT, AND OTHER CAPERS FROM THE CAREER OF BRITISH PERFORMANCE ARTIST ROSE ENGLISH

DISCUSSED: *Show Jumping, Angela Carter's Magical Realism, Equine Finery, A Time of Minimalism, The Male Gaze, Radical Women-Only Art Spaces, The Course of Capital, The Spirit of Champagne, Nothing, Naught, and Thought*

BY JENNIFER KABAT

I. HORSES, DEBUTANTES, BAROQUE, AND BALLET

Six women, girls really, march toward a dressage ring dressed in tiny tunics girdled with wide leather belts from which horsetails—real horsetails—shake proudly. The dancers wear white gloves, white knee socks, and high heels made of hooves, requiring balletic balance. They parade past porcelain horse figures—the kind of statuettes you'd find in a girl's bedroom—arranged by two prim attendants. A stunned photographer in bell-bottoms rushes to capture the scene, and the crowd stares. It is the summer of 1975 at the Southampton Horse Show in conservative rural England, and a staged piece of performance art called *Quadrille* is taking place instead of the dressage and show jumping the audience is here to see. As the women walk into the ring, they match each other's stride: right foot, left foot, their gait somewhere between horse and human, and the camera zooms in for a close-up of hoof-as-high-heel. At the edge of the ring, a mounted rider watches while the women trot through formations. In a precise line, the dancers link arms, lift legs, and bow. They go through their paces and

FACING PAGE: *Rose English, Jacky Lansley, Lynn MacRitchie, Sally Potter, Judith Katz and Sylvia Stevens,* Park Cafeteria *(1975). Site specific performance, durational over one week. Photo by: Geoff White. Serpentine Gallery, London.*
THIS PAGE: *Illustration of Rose English by Tony Millionaire.*

stand in pairs, forehead to forehead. The pose is intimate, nearly sexual.

The work of performance artist Rose English, *Quadrille* is easily one of the strangest things I've ever seen. Dressage is already a strange, moneyed world of riders in white jodhpurs, coattails, and top hats on horses with braided manes that move in precise, choreographed steps, akin to ballet. Watching the film of the 1975 performance, I can't help but think of British novelist Angela Carter's magical realism. She gave showgirls swans' wings and reinvented fairy tales, using the form to ask larger questions about culture and women's place in it. Now, looking at photographs of the audience that lined the ring several rows deep—women sitting with their hands clasped primly in their laps, men in dark suits and heavy-framed glasses, children with their legs dangling over the sides of their seats—it's hard for me to imagine what they're thinking, though one girl has her mouth open as if in shock.

What was Rose English trying to say about women and horses, sexuality and girls and their fetishism of horses? It's surreal and sexy and not at all what I expect to see from feminist performance art—not in 1975, perhaps not ever. This is not Yoko Ono inviting her audience to cut her clothes from her body or Gina Pane carving makeup into her face, or Marina Abramović inscribing a star into her skin or offering a whip and a gun to her audience to use on her. This is not about duration or endurance, pain or menstruation or birth; it's not about being beaten down in the kitchen or by motherhood. Here in the waxed-jacket crowd of riding boots and horses and men in suits on hot summer days, in this realm of the upper class, something weirder is happening—"weird" being the only way I can describe the collision of forms and culture taking place.

Ballet and dressage, with their shared origins in baroque court spectacle, fascinated English, and she'd originally wanted to stage *Quadrille* somewhere like Vienna's Spanish Riding School, the baroque palace dedicated to dressage, where horses and riders perform under crystal chandeliers. Instead, she was invited to put on the piece at the Southampton Horse Show as part of a short-lived performance-art festival nearby. *Quadrille* was the last of English's early work, made before she was twenty-five. At her college graduation show, a couple of years earlier, she'd staged erotic tableaux featuring three women, one *en pointe*, the other two naked on featherbeds, set to the music of Erik Satie. The performance reached its climax when the women kissed and a "lace" curtain she'd made of porcelain crashed to the floor. Her other early work referenced British horse culture and debutantes, pairing them with the porcelain models used in *Quadrille*. But *Quadrille* joined all these themes, as if exploring something larger about women and objectification.

Rose English is tall, with deep, round eyes. She could easily be Sophie Fevvers in Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*, "shaking out about her those tremendous red and purple pinions, pinions large enough, powerful enough to bear up such a big girl as she." Unlike Fevvers, though, who grew up on the streets of London, English comes from a middle-class family and spent her childhood in Gibraltar and rural England. Both places influenced her work. From Gibraltar her family frequently traveled to Franco's Spain on pilgrimages, not as participants but as spectators. She recalls the ceremony, the singing and dancing through the night. The pilgrimage sites were so isolated that everyone had to travel by horse and cart, and there was a particular kind of song, called a *saeta*, that people sang to the Virgin when they were most moved by her image. "The song is meant to be like a dart," she explains, "and the word *saeta* means 'dart' or 'arrow,' as if the song is meant to temporarily pierce the image. It lives momentarily in the breath of the song." This notion of piercing an image, of a vision being pierced by something—by words, by ideas, by someone's contact with it—seems an apt metaphor for English's work.

After her father died, her family moved to the British countryside, and her sister rode horses competitively. Together, they'd keep mental scorecards of how horsey someone was. She lowers her voice and tells me, "Barbour jacket? Check. Hermès head scarf? Check." She started following *Country Life*, a magazine dedicated to the landed gentry, and studied its portraits of debutantes. In her studio, a long, narrow room with sloping ceilings from which swans' wings hang, she picks up one of the photos to show me. A woman in pearls smiles demurely. "These young women were almost presented as if for sale," she says. "The portrait was to announce that they are now a woman and

Rose English, Quadrille *(1975). Site specific performance, approximately twenty minutes. Dressage arena, Southampton Horse Show, for the Southampton Festival of Performance Art. Performed by Joanna Bartholomew, Sally Cranfield, Helen Crocker, Maedée Duprès, Jacky Lansley and Judith Katz. Image courtesy of Karsten Schubert and Richard Saltoun.*

available. Here was a particularly codified class milieu." She was fascinated by the correlation between the women and certain items, like the Hermès scarves. "These women wore them, and they were covered with their regalia of horses and hooves."

Her obsession with women in equine finery fed into her creation of the costumes for *Quadrille*. The tails and hoof-heels took her eighteen months to make: she visited dog-food suppliers and abattoirs and had to cure the animal parts. Early attempts at the hoof-heels had her boiling the hooves, until she realized the easiest way to clean them was to bury them in the garden. She befriended a taxidermist at London's Natural History Museum and mastered tasks so grisly they sound like they come from Carter's retelling of the Bluebeard story. As she describes the process of cutting a horse's spinal column from its tail, her voice sounds like polished silver, the Queen's English, the one you hear on the BBC. Her gestures are precise, her carriage erect, and her back long. She has gray cropped hair; you can imagine her playing a queen. Only English was no born performer, and rarely appears in her early work. Briefly, at the start of *Quadrille*, she can be glimpsed as one of the attendants laying out the porcelain horses, her appearance more peripheral than participatory. Unlike other early-'70s performance artists, she had no intention of being in her own work and no yen to perform—at least not yet.

Gradually, though, over the course of forty years, she did begin appearing—as a showgirl and as a magician—in her own work. Like Fevvers, she has donned swans' wings and spangles. But while her work calls to mind Angela Carter's, the two never met. They were working in parallel worlds, wrestling with the same themes, and both captured something extraordinary for the time: a feminism concerned with the slippery sexuality that's threaded through myths and fairy tales. Carter retold "Little Red Riding Hood" and "Beauty and the Beast" in *The Bloody Chamber*, and addressed pornography

Jonker

THE MORNING INGRID Jonker drowned herself, she walked into the Sea Point police station and told a cop she'd been forsaken. Later, they found her body in the sea at Three Anchor Bay. At first a group of writers tried to plan a nonreligious service in her honor, but Jonker's parents refused to allow it. The fact that their daughter didn't belong to any church wasn't the issue. They weren't about to let a bunch of Cape Town commies take over the funeral. Her father was a nationalist member of Parliament. That there were nonwhites at the funeral made news. Names were named. Peter Clarke and Amos Langdown, Jerry Mathews and Adam Small were there, along with many other writers of the day, including Uys Krige and Jack Cope, Ingrid's lover. There's a photograph of Cope crumpled by the side of her grave. "The atmosphere," *The Johannesburg Sunday Times* reported, "was tense."

Stories about her abound. They call her South Africa's Sylvia Plath. She's been the subject of movies. She was brilliant. She was a rebel. She was promiscuous. She was a barefoot hippie before South Africa knew there was such a thing. She left wreckage wherever she went. She had a serious mental illness. She had guts is what she had. Thirty years after her death, in 1994, Nelson Mandela himself read Jonker's "The Child Who Was Shot Dead by Soldiers at Nyanga" at the opening of Parliament. He called her an Afrikaner and an African. You can listen to him intone on YouTube: "The child is not dead / not at Langa nor at Nyanga / not at Orlando nor at Sharpeville / nor at the police station at Philippi / where he lies with a bullet through his brain."

I recently bought a book called *More Afrikaans Short Stories*, and it includes the last thing she ever wrote, a short untitled sketch. It's about a little girl and her grandmother. The first lines are lucid and beautiful:

> It was a morning like all the other mornings of that winter. I heard the upper half of the door open softly and saw her enter, with her black shawl over her shoulders and the greyish light behind her. I pretended to be asleep. But I knew how the grey light was falling on her grey hair, and I heard her open the paper bag with the fish-heads and put them on the table in the middle of our room.

Her eyes are closed and yet she can see the light in her grandmother's hair. And those fish heads on the table. ✶

and women's sexual power in *The Sadeian Woman and the Ideology of Pornography*. English's work, meanwhile, has absorbed magic acts, opera, ballet, the baroque, philosophy, and French theory, and—more prosaically—music hall, talent shows, and pantomime, where Britain's biggest stars don drag at Christmastime. She pulls these performances together and flings down a gauntlet that almost parodies performance art, all with a made-you-look quality that might make you feel guilty at times for staring—or for your own sheer pleasure in it.

Despite this (or maybe because of it), she's barely known in the United States. She's done only two shows in New York City: the first in 1981, at Franklin Furnace, as part of a program pairing performance art from London and LA, and the second a decade later, a single show at Lincoln Center's SeriousFun Festival. As Stine Hebert, who curated the first major retrospective of English's work at Copenhagen's Kunsthal Charlottenborg, says, "She works on the metaphysical issues of presence and absence." Novelist Deborah Levy writes in an essay: "In a Rose English show, every gesture, every object, every image is part of her metaphysical narrative… she creates a chaos of possibilities through which she pulls her enquiry with charismatic command and wit." Perhaps her work's overt theatricality makes people in the art world uncomfortable by breaking the conventions of performance art, while the experimental nature of her performances confuses the theater world: she's rarely written about, and the first monograph and exhibition dedicated to her work appeared in 2014.

II. LONDON, SQUATTING, SWIMMING POOLS, AND COLLABORATIONS

In 1973, two years before *Quadrille*, English moved to London to get her MFA at the prestigious Royal College of Art. The school was too rigid, and she was miserable. She'd enrolled in the ceramics program, expecting she could create pieces to use in her performances, as she had in her undergraduate work—but studying ceramics at the RCA did not encompass the creation of set pieces featuring porcelain, Erik Satie, and sex.

"Interdepartmentalization was making everybody crazy," explains RoseLee Goldberg, the director of New York's performance-art biennial Performa. Goldberg ran the RCA's gallery in the early '70s and describes a London that had only four contemporary-art

galleries scattered across the city. She stumbles even trying to recall their names. Curator Lynda Morris, who was at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, paints the era as if it were a missing chapter from *The Flamethrowers*: a time of minimalism, and male artists who slept with female acolytes—only with a far less lucrative art scene.

From 1974 to 1975, the United Kingdom experienced almost 25 percent inflation and a rash of IRA bombings; conservative politics were thriving. Margaret Thatcher became the head of the Tory Party, and the racist National Front was growing in popularity. On the fringes of culture, collaboratives and cooperatives were sprouting up. Glam rock was emerging, too, and with its focus on sexuality, cabaret, and bending gender, as well as its use of vintage clothes, it created fertile ground for English's work. London had a progressive underground film scene, and theorist Laura Mulvey had just written her radical take on Hollywood in the article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," which applied semiotics and psychoanalysis to images of women in film.

"The question of politics of a woman's body," Mulvey explains now, as she talks about her essay, "expanded to being the politics of images of women." Collective spaces for dance, music, film, and even art were developing. Caroline Tisdall wrote in the *Guardian* of one show at a collective space in 1975: "It's a gallery–cum–meeting place run in a cooperative way and on a tight budget, and loose as if it could last until the demolisher's ball hits the rest of the Tandoori belt of Whitfield Street… And the aim is to try to combine that kind of interest with progressive art forms, discussion and poetry readings." Three years later she described this approach again in the same newspaper: "By now it's become quite familiar but it's worth remembering that the extra effort it requires is in fact something that has come about as an effort to overcome legendary British apathy."

Meanwhile, contemporary art was so unknown in London that when English was approached to submit a proposal for Documenta, the renowned contemporary-art festival in Kassel, Germany, she had no idea what it was or whether the invitation was significant. Mark Francis, now director of Gagosian Gallery in London, got his first job as a curator at the Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, in the mid-'70s. He'd studied dance with one of the women in *Quadrille* and recalls, "The art world then was very, very small. There was the Film-Makers Cooperative and a dance scene with an audience of about twenty people, and half of them were the performers from the previous evening."

Somehow, between glam rock and discussions of the male gaze, feminism in London became focused on examining pleasure and culture. It was the same milieu that produced Angela Carter, and while New York had war protests and consciousness-raising, and LA had the radical women-only art space Womanhouse, RoseLee Goldberg recalls that London had something sexier and less separatist happening. "It felt intimate," she says. "Here feminism was still more involved with guys, and it felt quite sexually exciting. It was post-'68. It was rock and roll. London feminism was really interesting."

Today it's hard to imagine that moment when feminism was nascent and London still a backwater with art only on its fringes, but Rose English dropped into this world as she dropped out of school. She took workshops in clowning and theater at a radical community space, Ovalhouse, in South London. There, while looking for performers, she met ballet dancer Jacky Lansley and filmmaker Sally Potter, who had a two-person dance troupe, Limited Dance Company. The two women asked English to be in a production they were staging at Serpentine Gallery.

Park Cafeteria took over the gallery in Hyde Park for a week, and English describes the scene as "a Maoist girl group," with set pieces spilling out into the park and Potter and Lansley dressed as femmes fatales in '30s suits, comically carrying wooden planks as "handbags" and appearing around the sides of the park's box hedges as if in a lost scene from *Monty Python*. Lansley shot a toy gun at visitors, at dogs, and at English, who rushed down a park path on roller skates, wearing swans' wings. Upon being shot, she collapsed, then got up and started again, comedy ensuing with each reenactment. There were monologues on aesthetics and politics; Lansley recalls, "We'd deliver them and shoot at them, taking down images we didn't like." Inside, Potter played the piano with a gun held to her head, like an existential female quasi Hamlet, delivering a soliloquy about the nature of being watched. Another member of the troupe, in a pink slip and sneakers, read aloud from political tomes. Wearing her wings, English

Rose English and Sally Potter, Berlin *(1976). Four-part site-specific performance, six evenings over three consecutive weekends. Pictured: Sally Potter. Photo by: Paul Derrick.*

played Camille Saint-Saëns's score for *The Dying Swan* on the violin. The gallery's doors were open to the park and leaves blew in and out, covering the score, so she played only the notes she could see. The scenes from *Park Cafeteria* managed to be comic, political, and achingly beautiful, but seeing them now, what strikes me is the way feminist theory was framed in gestures, like the gun to the head. It could have been in an Abramović piece from the same time, but here it comes with a monologue about what it means to be the female muse, and the nature of the gaze. For English, being in the piece was groundbreaking and thrilling. Since dropping out of the RCA, she'd been working alone trying to perfect the props for *Quadrille*. Everything she'd done before had been about constructing a carefully composed image around an object: a tableau. Here, for the first time, she experienced the pleasure of performing, of being part of a group, and also of working loosely and collaboratively. *Park Cafeteria* gave her permission to open up, as if it released something in herself.

After *Park Cafeteria*, Lansley, Potter, and English started to collaborate more often. All in their mid-twenties, they each brought a specific skill to the partnership. There was Sally Potter, with her moon face, freckles, and red hair; part of the London Film-Makers Cooperative, she had started making structuralist cinema at fourteen and dropped out of school at sixteen, and she would one day go on to make the film *Orlando* (based on the Virginia Woolf novel). There was Jacky Lansley, with her ballerina's poise; she had been a dancer with the Royal Ballet, an experience she describes as "the most heightened form of female objectification," and had left abruptly when the director declared that no woman could ever be a choreographer. And there was Rose English, with her interest in costumes, props, and erotic tableaux, and

with her animals—the swans' wings and horses' tails. Together, the three thrashed out ways to integrate feminist theory with art, mixing Marx and Lacan with comedy and pastiche, figuring their way into postmodernism before the word was in wide currency. Over a five-year period, the trio created dozens of pieces, with authorship shifting between them. During this time, English learned to dance. She took ballet and technique classes and got increasingly comfortable performing, though she rarely spoke in their performances.

The summer that *Quadrille* and *Park Cafeteria* took place, English had to move. She couldn't find anywhere she could afford to live in London, so Potter suggested squatting together. "We were extremely naive," English says. "We found a place in the center of town that lasted two weeks before we were evicted." That started a period of moving from building to building, lugging their lives and work with them. English boxed up her costumes and sewing machine, and they searched for places big enough to make their work in. "There was an exuberance to squatting," she says, "but it was hard, time-consuming, and perilous." Despite the struggles, the buildings they squatted in eventually became settings for their pieces, and also influenced the women in other, more metaphorical ways: the blurred boundaries of squatting seemed an apt analogy for that period, when life and work, ideas and authorship were shared openly.

Whenever they broke into buildings, English was the first one in. She had long legs and could easily leap over railings to get to the basement, where she'd pry open the door with a crowbar. In a Georgian house near Mornington Crescent, they each had a floor to themselves, but there was no bathroom, only a sink to wash in, and no heat, just coal fires and paraffin heaters. It had an almost Dickensian glamour, and was the setting for a number of their pieces. Another squat became a set for Potter's breakthrough short film *Thriller*. The attic looked like a backdrop for *La bohème*, so she shot a feminist take on the opera there.

Squatting was a political act, too. Potter says, "It was a protest against property as investment and the unaffordable housing at the time, reclaiming these empty spaces that had been deliberately left empty." She and English were attending feminist conferences and reading groups, as well as lectures at the Film-Makers Cooperative on feminism and the male gaze. English laughs, recalling how she and Potter would discuss the lectures into the night. "We'd have to let off steam afterward, talking about pleasure and trying to reclaim it for ourselves. We had to remember there was something about how these highly theoretical ideas could be punctured or expressed inside a live event and not just an illustration of a theory." The way she describes it—that puncturing of an image with a live event—sounds like a *saeta*.

Instead of making work that was simply theoretical or esoteric, English says, "We had a slightly naive longing to be part of that world of popular culture, while loving this more rigorous and austere one, too, and we wanted to bring them together." The 1976 Winter Olympics had just featured a British figure skater, John Curry, who took the gold and brought dance to the ice, riveting English and Potter along with the rest of the British public. A month later, squatting, feminism, theory, pop culture, politics, pleasure, sports, and skating all came together in *Berlin*, their four-part serial performance that took place every Saturday night for a month. The piece started and ended in their Georgian squat, while the other two episodes took place at a nearby skating rink and swimming pool. "We decided," English says, "to enter epic space as women artists, as heroines of our own epic fiction." In each episode Potter enacted different female archetypes—a female soloist, or an earth mother in a skirt made of magnolia leaves.

The three wanted the piece to take place outside an art-world context, outside a gallery or museum, because of how those spaces shaped perceptions. Inside the house near Mornington Crescent, the spectators watched through double doors, and each act was followed by a silent Greek chorus of men in mourning dress. Themes repeated and linked visually between each episode. In episode two, Potter ice-skated topless, pulled by the men. At the end of that segment, she stood on the rink before a fire to melt the ice, prefiguring the next performance, held at an Olympic swimming pool. There, English stood atop the high dive while, at the other end of the pool, Potter, in a crinoline dress, talked about her frustration with the image she was presenting in the performances. Laura Mulvey recalls, "Rose dove into the pool straight, straight as a poker," and swam to Potter, helping her out of the dress. Together the women swam

naked back across the pool while discussing how society reads images of women. The chorus, dripping wet, lined up on the diving board and watched. The final episode was staged back at the house, and the event was so crowded, the women had to perform it twice. The male chorus reappeared, standing in a line, just as they'd stood on the diving board. Potter presented a list of what they'd shown and discussed in the previous evenings, almost like an appendix. In one photo documenting that evening, English stands on a block of ice, in skates, wearing her swans' wings and dress, waiting for a tear to fall down her face.

"The images," Potter explains, "were cinematic and conceptual, but all flowing from the essential elements: fire, ice, and water, and their mutability." She cautions against too literal a reading. "The images were dense with meaning and cross-references," she says. "If you didn't understand it, you could feel it, and if you didn't understand it one week when you were in the ice rink, you might begin to the next at the swimming pool, and you'd really see what it meant to be enveloped by water."

People didn't necessarily get it, though. In an interview in 2006 with Anna Dyke, a curator at the British Library, English said, "*Berlin* was different from other work at the time that was made in a more agitprop way and would announce its feminist agenda and the issue it was addressing. We wanted to be formally adventurous but also political, but that wasn't recognized." Still, Mulvey saw *Berlin* and called it "absolutely sensational."

In an era when performance art was often about duration (Joseph Beuys lived with a coyote in a New York gallery for three days, and Vito Acconci embedded himself under his gallery's floor, masturbating for eight hours a day for three weeks), English and Potter made a piece that was also about time but that managed to upend the expectations of durational pieces by using an episodic structure, "[like] a serial or a TV series," as Potter says. The production was imbued with a sense of cinematic perspective, while the women questioned the very same images they presented. They'd put all that they were reading, all the theory they'd been digesting, into practice—only it wasn't entirely successful. Their performance was also trying to reference the salons of the Weimar Republic as a response to the growth of fascism in the UK, a message few viewers caught.

Mark Francis asked Limited Dance Company to do a performance at the Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, the following year, 1977, but the women weren't sure they could accept an invitation to perform in a museum. Before agreeing, they debated what being in a museum meant and how people would read their work there. Then, when they discovered that the performance would take place in the midst of a Frank Stella show, in the same gallery as his paintings, they had to discuss whether that, too, would be acceptable. Those arguments became an accompanying book that laid out the stakes for the piece. The book also served as the audience's ticket to the performance, which was called *Mounting*.

The book features floods, menstruation, sharks' teeth, and a quoted debate about ideology, art, and capitalism. The dialogue loops and quotes itself, turning it into a serious farce. On the last page, a photo of a circus horse whose woman rider is diving into a pool is reproduced three times. Francis remembers "being impressed that anybody was picking up on that language and theory at the time in the UK and [that they were] using this combination of team comics and jamming those things together with dance." He adds, "It's very, very important."

Mounting took place on two nights and pulled together Clint Eastwood, cowboys, the "golden boy," all-conquering American culture, and the art star. The women riffed on the title of one Stella painting, *Puerto Rican Blue Pigeon*. Soundtracks from spaghetti westerns, *Jaws*, and *West Side Story* were played on a record player, and the women interrogated Stella's paintings. The first night nothing hung together, English says. Lynn MacRitchie, a reviewer and good friend of the women who had appeared in *Park Cafeteria* and squatted with English and Potter, concurred when she wrote about both nights for *New Dance* magazine. Mark Francis apparently worried about the rawness of their aesthetic and wondered why they had to attack Frank Stella. English recalls, "[Francis] kept saying, 'Stella's a really nice guy. He's not like that at all,' as if we were personally critiquing him rather than his position and his role." In her article, MacRitchie described the first evening as a failure and the second as "elation, excitement." Everything pulled together, she said. It was also very funny, and part of the night's success came from how the three women played it for laughs.

The second performance began with

English, her hair in a ponytail, wearing a horse's tail, studying the Stellas. A cowboy, Lansley then appeared and played the theme from a western. Next, Potter, as *West Side Story*'s Maria, cued up the song for the musical's rumble. English and Lansley reenacted the fight scene between the Jets and the Sharks, while Potter mimed fear in the style of a silent movie. However, the women broke off the fight abruptly and walked off arm-in-arm. Next, English interrogated Lansley (who was acting as both Frank Stella and the cowboy) about the paintings, while Potter's Maria talked about ideology, the gallery system, and how the art world anoints success. It all came to an end with the theme music from *Jaws*. Potter, the virginal Maria in white, poured fake menstrual blood on her inner thigh. Lansley died. Hollywood and high art clashed.

Mounting was both funny and furious. The piece was a direct examination of how art and its stars are created, and a comment on the women's own exclusion from the art world both because they were women and because they were performance artists. They'd chosen performance as their medium to undo the value system attached to art. They refused to create objects from their work that could be sold, and many of their performances weren't even visually documented—including *Mounting*. There's nothing to see now but the book. It was the first performance for which they'd produced any lasting object, which is part of why the piece is so important. Their combination of dance and film with feminism and Marxist discussions of the means of art production still feels groundbreaking. Now such pointed work comes endowed with a label: institutional critique. Today we take for granted the questioning of an artist's worth and work. In the '80s, Richard Prince became famous for rephotographing stereotyped images of cowboys. He was lauded for his oblique commentary on American culture, while few noticed or took seriously how these women had done the same thing years before.

Rose English and Sally Potter, Berlin *(1976). Four-part site-specific performance, six evenings over three consecutive weekends. Photo by: Paul Derrick.*

Mounting wasn't the artists' last collaboration, but it was perhaps their best. It was the end of the '70s; the era was changing. In London, punk was happening and a free-market ideology was becoming enshrined, so, too, was consumerism. Laws against squatting were enacted: the building English and Potter had moved to became a focal point for a pitched battle over squatting, as families and protesters occupied it, trying to keep it as subsidized housing. The police sent in spies. In the summer of 1978, the police attacked the squatters, arresting and clearing them out with over seven hundred riot officers. Potter was jailed, and English, who had information about the police's tactics and their spies, acted as her defense's clerk. In 1980, after Lansley had put together the cooperative dance space X6 in order to focus exclusively on dance and choreography, it was forced to close because of gentrification in the city. She went on to cofound another dance collective in East London, but says wearily about

that time, "I wanted to start focusing on my own work. There's something about feminism and collectives and women being allowed to develop their own voices. Collaborations take energy, and for women that can distract from their own work."

Though she was referring to the effort it took to establish a new collective space, not to working with Potter and English, collaborating and squatting took a toll on the women. The three artists were starting to grow apart. English and Potter had their own separate apartments for the first time, and Potter started working with musician Lindsay Cooper on music projects. She, Cooper, and English talked about creating an opera. They couldn't get funding for it, but, based on *Thriller*'s success, the British Film Institute offered Potter money to make her first feature.

Cooper, English, and Potter cowrote a script that eventually became *The Gold Diggers*, covering subjects ranging from the nature of cinema and pleasure to women as stars and the course of capital. Potter was the director, English did the sets and costumes, and Cooper wrote the score. The money from and prestige of the BFI's backing opened doors for the women and brought outsize expectations. English's boyfriend at the time, writer and theater director David Gale, lived in Julie Christie's house. Through that connection, English and Potter approached Christie to talk her into playing the lead. Because of the film's political aspirations, Christie agreed to star in it as "the Icon," Ruby (the name was a sly reference to the celestial ruby, the philosopher's stone). The women naively thought the film would be as popular as a Hollywood film. It was the first time any of them had been on such a big stage, and the first time Potter had created a narrative film.

Shot in Iceland and London, the movie took years to finish. Potter insisted on editing it herself, and English learned to edit in order to be her assistant. The film was shot by Babette Mangolte in black and white, and it's achingly beautiful. It opens with a lamentation for pleasure, a song about going to the pictures for an escape, and Julie Christie's monologue about the nature of film: "I'm born in a beam of light. I move continuously yet I'm still… you can see me but never touch me. I can speak to you but never hear you. We are strangers yet you take me inside of you. What am I?"

Today, as English talks about the film in her studio, she says they tried too much and were too ambitious. By phone from France, Potter concurs. "It was a tough collaboration. There was the strict division of labor required in a feature film." In the notes accompanying the movie's 2009 re-release, she described the time as an "intense, passionate, difficult triangular collaborative process… It left each of us frustrated and exhausted."

Watch *The Gold Diggers* now, and it's like seeing a feminist Godard film. There's the *saeta,* with songs piercing images, while a model of Christie looking like a pilgrimage saint is carried on a litter. Monologues are delivered about the nature of the image, and the movie appropriates musicals, period dramas, and black-and-white silent thrillers, repeating themes to undo them. You get singing and dancing *and* semiotics, as if Foucault's writing on gold and Mulvey's on cinema had been committed to 35 mm film. "I was so impressed with it," Mulvey tells me. But no one recognized the film's achievement at the time, and it was panned. "Sally took so long making it," Mulvey explains, "and it seemed like the last moment of that '70s cinema. It was the end of the era, the last of a certain kind of film." It also marked the end of their collaborations.

In 1981, while *The Gold Diggers* was still in production, Potter and

PHYSICS AND CHEMISTRY TERMS THAT APPEAR IN RAE ARMANTROUT POEMS

✯ *chirality* ("Chirality")
✯ *spin states* ("Accounts")
✯ *molecule* ("Attention")
✯ *viscoelastic* ("Audience")
✯ *momentum* ("Hoop")
✯ *lepton* ("Two and Two")
✯ *luster* ("Luster")
✯ *calcium* ("Natural History")
✯ *free energy* ("Natural History")
✯ *electrons* ("Chronos")
✯ *photons* ("Chronos")
✯ *surfactant* ("Audience")
✯ *RNA* ("RNA World")
✯ *renormalization* ("Dress Up")
✯ *mass* ("Dress Up")
✯ *charge* ("Dress Up")
✯ *particle* ("Chirality")
✯ *dark matter* ("Dark Matter")
✯ *oscillating* ("Two and Two")
✯ *planck length* ("The Ether")

—list compiled by Gabriel Ojeda-Sague

English were both asked to be part of a series of women's performances at Franklin Furnace, in New York. English had thought the two of them would work together, but they didn't. Potter and Lindsay Cooper decided to do something else, she says levelly, as if she hadn't taken that decision personally. None of the women wants to discuss the details directly, and I don't blame them.

Potter says, "The frustrations of collaborating on *The Gold Diggers* gave Rose an energy to say, 'Fuck this, I'm going to do my own thing, and I'm going to take this space and find my voice.' The particular work she did immediately following the movie was absolutely incredible."

III. HORSES, FLYING, AND MAGIC

Throughout the '80s, English took on her own voice and started to command the stage herself. She developed ninety-minute solo shows of monologues: language became the central medium in which she worked. She'd gone from staging scenarios performed by others, to collaborating with others in pieces where she barely spoke, to speaking in a continuous stream of words, realizing the power of her relationship with the audience. She addressed the audience and played with its expectations. She also incorporated pop culture, politics, and magic acts (though her attempts at conjuring always failed). She'd promise audiences she'd fly, only to have her dress take off on wires while she remained rooted firmly onstage. In one show she swore she'd walk on water and joked with the spectators about whether or not she could.

The work was influenced by music hall (a British vaudeville tradition), and Tommy Cooper, an English magician she'd watched on TV as a child. She likens him to Duchamp, and says he was just as important culturally, not to mention equally important to her work. "The audience," she says, "was as interested in him as a comedian as they were in the magic he purportedly failed to perform. He was very abstract in a way." Even her sets resembled the magician's. Just as English did, he'd appear onstage with only enough props to create the barest suggestion of a character or scenario—underlining the slim boundary between persona and performance, the audience and the larger world.

By the end of the '80s she was working with larger casts and in bigger theaters. She performed at the Royal Court and in old music-hall palaces. Her productions married dance, comedy, live music, and a self-aware theatricality. She began to revisit earlier themes, and as in *Berlin*, her new pieces often incorporated a male chorus, though it was no longer silent. In one production the chorus aped swimming; in another, *The Double Wedding*, there was ice-skating on a tiny rink.

Staged in 1991, *The Double Wedding* questioned form and postmodern quotation. English was fascinated by plays that wanted to be movies, operas that became ballets, novels that were translated into cinema—all of them longing to be something else. "Why should one form love and want to be another?" is how she puts it. Adaptations were often part of English's work. She'd referenced Shakespeare in *Mounting* and in *Park Cafeteria* as well as in pieces she did in the late '70s, while she repurposed ballet and dressage in *Quadrille*. But *The Double Wedding* could also be read as a meditation on the failures of *The Gold Diggers*. Potter, Cooper, and English had originally wanted to make an opera, and instead turned it into a movie. It's impossible not to wonder: if the production had stayed an opera—if it hadn't changed form—what might it have been? Would it have been more successful and less stressful, less trying on the collaborations and friendships involved?

At one point in *The Double Wedding* the cast dresses in drag, mimicking English. She upbraids them for failing to be good enough, barking at them to try harder. Here she's a dominatrix, Thatcher-like, with perfectly shellacked hair and wearing an evening dress. She tells them, "This is not a tribute; this is an act of perilous transgression. This is a warning that anything you ever do is an absolute… But we get here a doubling-up, a doubling intensity, and a doubling insensitivity when what we long for is a sense of ensemble and a sense of the whole. We want the corps de ballet, but what we have here is endless fragmentation."

In all her solo work, her language is trilled and turned inside out. Her words come armed with an onomatopoeic power, and she repeats them, using words that sound alike and have similar meanings, only to undo them; other times they sound alike but contradict each other. In *The Double Wedding* her doubles failed as they tried to ape her, and language failed, too: it was clear she loved it, but it endlessly fell short. Words could never capture

Rose English and Sally Potter, Berlin *(1976). Four-part site-specific performance, six evenings over three consecutive weekends. Pictured: Rose English. Photo by: Roger Perry.*

anything precisely. "Sometimes," she said in the production, "things are so simple, so dense and sometimes so dense it becomes empty…"

Other artists at the time were also adopting language as their medium: Richard Prince had his jokes and Marlene McCarty appropriated the words hurled at her on the street, while Gran Fury barbed language to create pieces about AIDS, and Barbara Kruger underlined language's dictates. English seemed poised between meaning and emptiness, as if longing for the former in a world where postmodernism seemed to deliver only a Baudrillard-like simulation of it.

The same year as *The Double Wedding,* something profound happened. English was asked to perform as the spirit of champagne in the English National Opera's production of *Die Fledermaus*. In the light-hearted opera, she played a showgirl with a teetering headdress who comes onstage to deliver just two words. Waiting in the wings to go on, though, she stood opposite a show horse; like English, it wore a feathered headdress. English says, "We just started to really clock each other with our little plumes on, me waiting in the wings and it waiting in its stall. As it stood there, it would often be looking at me, and I started to really think about these circus horses or performing horses as the equine equivalent of the showgirl."

There, in her headdress and spangles, the desire was stirred for a horse-and-human crossover: showgirls and show horses, dressage and ballet. She still had her old obsession to untangle. The next year she was invited to stage a one-off piece at Lincoln Center's SeriousFun Festival, which celebrated performance art, and English suggested an improvised performance with a horse: similar to her earlier improvised ninety-minute monologues, it would be just her onstage, but this time with a horse. As in some of her other performances, the piece, which she titled *My Mathematics*, was a bit of a dare to herself. If it bombed, it was only one night.

In *My Mathematics* she played a washed-up showgirl whose eyelashes were so long that "those in the front row [were] in danger of getting enmeshed in this work"—audience members had to trim the foot-long lashes. She underlined the conventions of theatricality as she had in previous pieces. Her show horse, named Mathematics, appeared only in the second act. English was done up in a fringed outfit; high-cut and exposing her buttocks, it was Dolly Parton–meets–Vegas stripper. Comically, she tried (and failed) to get the horse to perform. Both she and the horse had their backs to the audience. "You and I," she said to him, "are equally compromised by our own costumes, and we are both captivatingly in captivity at this moment, in danger of becoming emblematic and symbolic at the same time."

This scene echoed the conversation she and Potter had in *Berlin*, while swimming naked across the pool, about the nature of the image of

women. Throughout English's work, horses have served as stand-ins for the objectified woman, and this doubling was inevitably unsettling. More unsettling was what happened next in *My Mathematics*. English spoke: "We have been erroneous in our eroticism, and we have been circumscribed when we wish to be sensual." The horse lay down and rolled around in the sand, and she followed suit, mimicking him. "I always wanted to do a bed scene with you, beloved one," English said, and delivered a soliloquy on Eros, endings, arias, arenas, and erogenous zones.

In the production she also repeated a refrain that seems almost existential: "If nothing equals nothing, and naught equals naught, what do we think we know about thought?" She delivered a version of this question in act one and again at the show's end, before Mathematics galloped offstage. The heady mix of metaphysics, of being and nothingness seemed to address the place of the stage and performance itself. At the end of the piece, a little girl sang about arenas and arias. It's clear that for English something sublime, something metaphysical and transformative, happens onstage. All of her solo work addresses this idea of transformation, as in the magic acts she'd tried and failed to perform. Still, the audience always made the leap (as if that were the true magic at hand). They were able to see the comedy in the failure by understanding what was meant to have happened. The power of the stage and of performance was that almost-mysterious act of transubstantiation.

My Mathematics hardly turned out to be the one-off production English had expected. She initially performed it twice, first in New York and then at Queen Elizabeth Hall, one of London's largest venues. The performances featured two different horses, and now, some twenty years later, she remembers both their names and talks fondly of them, as if there's a deeper love story about both. The performance eventually traveled to Australia and to festivals across the UK. She started developing a horse opera and staged sketches and vignettes for it at the Serpentine Gallery in London and the Banff Centre in Canada. In 1997, it looked as if she'd finally get the money to stage the opera. It was going to be in Newmarket, in the east of England, where a historic horse auction was held. "Like Glyndebourne," English describes it, likening it to one of the country's most famous opera venues, "only with seven hundred and fifty stalls for the horses," she adds, laughing.

Her production was to have nearly a dozen equestrians and their horses, the riders ranging in age from a child to a circus doyenne. There were to be live musicians, a Bulgarian women's chorus, a young girl, a tenor, and English's own words spoken throughout the libretto. The story was "a meditation on the cosmology of the circus," she explains. It would feature a particular horse, "the Horse Who Knows History." As she wrote the script, English examined the history of the horse, everything from horse burial and sacrifice to famous horses, like Alexander the Great's Bucephalus. Her plans included a requiem, with the burial of an actual horse; the opera would invoke history as it slid between myth and fantasy.

English had wanted Katja Schumann, a renowned Danish circus-horse rider, to play the doyenne. In online videos from the early '90s of Schumann's performances with the Big Apple Circus, she gets horses to leap and prance as precisely as the women had in *Quadrille*. She also resembles English holding the whip and talking to her Mathematics. But the opera never happened; the money failed to materialize. In the years since, she's developed an "opera of the ordinary" with longtime musical collaborator Ian Hill, focusing on everyday lives in London, and has been developing large-scale performances with Chinese acrobats.

Three years ago she finally got to work with Schumann as English's first major career retrospective, *The Eros of Understanding*, opened at Copenhagen's Kunsthal Charlottenborg. The exhibition was dedicated to English's work with horses, and instead of being in the show, Schumann performed before the opening. No one was present to witness her, though. It was almost as if she were casting a magic spell in the space. In *My Mathematics* English gets her horse to do a figure eight, the sign of infinity, onstage in the sand. Her aughts and naughts, presence and absence, are made manifest in the gesture. In the gallery, Schumann did something similar. When I spoke with the curator Stine Hebert afterward, she told me that together Schumann and her horse Ushastik "made the imprint of a perfect infinity symbol in the arena installation, and then they left… The visitors to the exhibition never got to see this material, but they were left with the traces of the event." ✯