

The History of Cathy Gordon's Anger

By Kathleen Smith

"We need and can trust no other authority than our own personal truth"

Simone de Beauvoir

(HAMMER v.07-2014 to v.02-2015)

Why is Cathy Gordon angry? Why would she not be? Life can make you angry one way or another. No believer in revenge or wasting righteous energy, Gordon gently and agilely lashes out by getting busy. She'll crawl on her knees, hang from ropes, and hammer it home.

The lengthy history of Cathy Gordon's anger has most recently found expression in *HAMMER: The History of Cathy Gordon's Anger - Six Strategies for Sublimation*. Designed as a shared experience but performed as a multidisciplinary solo work, it is darker and more intense in many ways than some of Gordon's previous pieces. Yet it is also just as hopeful and just as concerned with getting on with it in spite of negative or traumatic emotional baggage. And, as with previous performance experiences such as *On My Knees* and *Bouncing Bride*, and almost anything else from Gordon's considerable and still growing oeuvre that you care to name, there is also humour and there is joy.

Out of a background in theatre, dance and cultural administration, Gordon has forged a practice based equally on distilling the stuff of everyday life and melding it with radical expressions of physicality. In complex community arts projects – such as *Loss in Lansdowne* in 2009, in which residents of a Toronto neighbourhood were invited to lend artifacts and stories related to loss, or the *Mémoire Mile End Project*, a similar project in Montreal – Gordon has become adept at extracting stories from communities and transforming them into legible lexicons that engender compassion, comprehension and resolution.

But it is in her solo performances, such as *HAMMER*, created with a small number of trusted collaborators, that Gordon reaches most deeply into her own personal history to uncover truths that may be shared, in understanding – or simply in caring solidarity – with members of an audience who also become participants in her rituals of release.

"The personal is political"

Carol Hanisch

(HAMMER v.05-2013 to v.02-2015)

Crawling and Bouncing in a Big White Dress

In August of 2007, on what would have been Gordon's 13th wedding anniversary, the artist executed an eight-hour homage to her eight-year marriage in a "public divorce ceremony" that was also an endurance performance. Wearing a long white dress and a veil and crawling on her hands and knees from a starting point in Toronto's Kensington Market, Gordon and a team of attendants, journeyed through the downtown core, stopping at a number of significant "stations" along the way for a series of rituals. The performance ended at sundown at a secluded beach on Lake Ontario, where Gordon stripped, plunging naked into the water. The personal – the dissolution of an intimate relationship (it should be noted that Gordon's soon to be-ex husband Steve Marsh also took part in *On My Knees*) and a test of physical endurance – melded seamlessly with public spectacle (participants could walk along as part of Gordon's entourage, watch from designated check-points and follow her journey online) and celebration in a spirit of inclusion and camaraderie.

Gordon extended her commentary on marriage and divorce for Toronto's Nuit Blanche in 2009, when she created an interactive performance called *Bouncing Bride: What is Down Must Go Up*. Gordon constructed a 10-foot-high platform disguised as a gigantic wedding cake (designed by Laird MacDonald). Gordon invited Nuit Blanche revelers to join the "bouncing bride" (either herself or one of her team, all wearing full-length wedding dresses) on a trampoline placed on top of the cake, in the location traditionally occupied by figurines of the bride and groom.

This light-hearted look at the "bright-side" of divorce also featured a projected text series of a hundred positive divorce stories ranging from Pierre and Margaret Trudeau to personal stories collected specifically for the project. Adding to the festive atmosphere, performance artist Ulysses Castellanos provided music as a wedding DJ and dancing in the courtyard of St. George The Martyr's Church was encouraged. As was lounging in the memory-foam base of the cake; visitors' imprints in the foam created "waves in the icing" that served as a physical reminder of their metaphysical traces and the impermanence of all relationships.

Hanging

As part of the ad hoc Contrary Collective, Gordon created and performed *Little Big Man Remix* with collaborators Terrance Houle and Ulysses Castellanos. First

at the Toronto Free Gallery in 2012, then later at Regina's Dunlop Gallery and Montreal's Viva Art Action, the multi-disciplinary performance cites the 1970 Arthur Penn film *Little Big Man* and explores individual identity within colonial power structures both past and present. Here Gordon and her co-conspirators slide in and out of various roles, playing against and with "type", inspired by the figure of "The Contrary" in Native North American society (which also appears in the film), a trickster character who deliberately behaves in a manner opposite to his or her peers in the community.

In the essay, *Little Big Man Remix: Music for My Antipodean Heart*, writer and curator Wanda Nanibush notes that: "Gordon's influence as a dancer is felt in all of the admirably choreographed movement sequences." But more than dance skills (Gordon's dance training is limited), it is Gordon's willingness to nudge at the boundaries of personal physical comfort (her own and her audience's) that distinguishes much of her performance work.

In the final moments of *Little Big Man Remix*, Gordon leaves the ground (I've noted over the years that this artist has a visceral relationship with terra firma, always getting closer to it or jumping as far away from it as she can – Gordon shares this affiliation with most dance artists. And the viscosity is in common with many of the performance artists she admires). Nanibush describes the scene: "... Gordon leaves her place behind the keyboard, climbs a ladder, and is suspended from the ceiling by ropes. She dangles above the audience; an image of the precariousness of life coupled with the feeling created by the music to keep playing through it all."

"Anger, like love, is a moral emotion. I have watched people use anger in the name of emotional liberation, to erode affection and trust, whittle away their spirits in bitterness and revenge, diminish their dignity in years of spiteful hatred. And I watch with admiration those who use anger to probe for truth, who challenge and change the complacent injustices of life, who take an unpopular position center stage while others say "shhhh" from the wings."

Carol Tavris Ph.D.

ANGER: The Misunderstood Emotion

Hammering

HAMMER: The History of Cathy Gordon's Anger - Six Strategies for Sublimation is still evolving through a series of iterations. Its length can vary considerably, but Gordon continues to work with the same key structural elements and content. Using a multitude of tactics – from warm-up exercises that are typically used in the acting studio to the sharing of tasks to lining the walls with keywords, text passages and headlines scrawled on poster paper -- Gordon

devises a space in which to communicate some truths about anger, and, especially, her own very personal anger: where it comes from, what it can be used for, how to mask it. She talks about her sister Cynthia's suicide at the age of 44. She talks about three brothers, all of whom died before she was born. She talks about growing up with a judgmental mother who was in so much pain that, as a child, Gordon did everything in her power to avoid adding more. She talks about providing nighttime care for an ailing grandmother, which led to a habit of sleeping in mornings, which led to ... shame.

Shame rears its head also when Gordon explores her feelings about her body. Unresolved about whether or not she might be considered "fat" (now, or at any point in her life) Gordon comes back again and again to this particular body issue in her work, poking and probing it like a days-old Band-Aid, periodically ripping it off to see if the underlying wound has healed yet. She frequently strips naked, sometimes asking viewers to close their eyes, other times accepting their gaze. Sometimes she simply changes her clothes. It's an indicator of Gordon's political positioning, evidence of a feminism that is almost always working quietly away in the background, no matter the foregrounded subject Gordon is pursuing at any given moment. In HAMMER, Cathy Gordon's feminism is as overtly expressed as her anger; indeed, at times, they seem one.

Gordon has been influenced by a number of remarkable women – her lost sister, theatre director and teacher Cynthia Grant, Nadia Ross of STO Union, who has acted as a dramaturge and coach for part of the HAMMER creation process. And recently, Israeli psychoanalyst, cultural theorist and painter Bracha L. Ettinger has impacted Gordon's thinking process. The articulation of Ettinger's artistic practice is a sophisticated blend of ideas about pre-birth, spirituality, mother/daughter relations and feminine eros. Her writings on trans-subjectivity and trauma have transformed contemporary debates in art, psychoanalysis, women's and cultural studies. For Gordon, discovering Ettinger was to discover both a kindred spirit and an intellectual framework within which to further explore personal histories of abuse and trauma.

"She [Ettinger] expands a word's conceptual range from the legal and testimonial meaning of bearing witness to the crime against the other, to being with, but not assimilated to, and to being beside the other in a gesture that is much more than mere ethical solidarity."

Griselda Pollack on Bracha L. Ettinger
Aesthetic Witnessing in the Era of Trauma
(HAMMER v.07-2014 to v.02-2015)

In spite of, or perhaps, because of the dark material that spawned it, HAMMER, like much of Gordon's solo work, vibrates with compassion, tenderness and a kind of loopy humour. I am reminded of something I read recently in Rebecca Solnit's *The Faraway Nearby*, in which she describes Chuck Jones' Wile E. Coyote, based on the Native North American creation character of "Coyote", "...who is often broken, occasionally killed, always resurrected, and never annihilated, who represents the comic principle of survival." Wile E. is not exactly reflective about his perpetual survival and resurrection, and thus he continues to make the same tragic, comic mistakes. He never gets angry, he never gets even and he never evolves. For Gordon however, survival leads the way to many things, not the least of which is a desire to explore what made it possible, the price it has exacted and how we might help each other achieve it.

"How close can we get?"

Cathy Gordon

(HAMMER v.08-2013)

The artist brings considerable charm, energy and skill to the task of wooing her audience-participants, gaining their trust and respectfully pondering which of their emotional/spiritual pressure points might overlap with her own. "Though our paths to this room in which we're standing are different, we're all in this together" is the banal yet also profound basis on which Gordon creates her performances. In the end, it is a practice of generosity rather than ego.

In a recent 90-minute iteration of HAMMER, performed by Gordon at the Experimentica Festival in Cardiff, Wales, the artist invited her participant audience to each take a small piece of a hammer, molded out of clay and displayed on a plinth. Together, they disassembled the tool, rolling small bits in their hands, keeping it with them as Gordon moved through the history of her anger. As the show ends, Gordon offered each a chance to either keep or rid themselves of the clay bits they have been clutching tightly throughout the experience. To a man/woman, they returned the clay lumps to the plinth on their way out of the room and back into the world.

Learn more about Cathy Gordon's work at www.cathygordon.com