

Noémie Lafrance, Melanie Maar, and Keith Hennessy Inscribe the Body

By Deborah Jowitt

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Noémie Lafrance and spectators in "Home."

You climb the splintery stairs to a Williamsburg loft, where you are politely relieved of your coat and bag, given a name tag, and asked to go into the kitchen and wash your hands. How nervous do you get? Since

Noémie Lafrance devised the performance you're about to see, not very. Lafrance is known for staging site-specific pieces in city spaces, and no one got injured or dirty watching her gorgeous *Descent* coil down the stairwell in the New York City Court Building Clock Tower or her *Noir* unfold its 1930s gangster tale while you sat in a car in a parking garage. However, you can sense ritual in the air, and her new *Home* is subtitled, "the body as place." The question is, whose body?

The room we're ushered into is almost filled by a very long dining table (heavy wood, inlaid, old). On this particular night, ten of us sit along one side, ten along the other. Staring. The *plat du jour* is definitely not edible. Curled on her side on the table is Lafrance. She's wearing antlers (real ones), plus flesh-colored panties, a skimpy top that reveals her very pregnant belly, and . . . what's that on her right leg???? As she inches her way along the table, we see that it's a miniature agrarian world—so tiny that Lafrance's discreet assistants, Celeste Hastings and Melissa Lockwood, pass out magnifying glasses. Two-inch parsley florets serve as trees. Minuscule animals are scattered around, some in a herd near a single piece of fencing. It's a devastatingly brilliant and witty image—over all too soon—of the female body as a fecund place in more ways than one.

The loft is a home and an office, and Lafrance plays with those two aspects, aided in her transformations by Thomas Dunn's warm lighting (hanging lamps, mirrors, discreet spotlights—the glow punctuated by pitch-dark moments). Seated in a chair at the head of the table, Lafrance is an imperious CEO, telling us that we will die but the corporation will go on. She fixes this person with a steely stare, that one with a sly smile, another with a disappointed moue. Later, we become the drudges in this "conference room." Maré Hieronimus, wearing antlers and a pin-striped jacket, orders us to add one word to each of the many sheets of paper being passed around the table. She keeps doling out paper and yelling, "Faster!" until a storm of words accumulates.

However, when Lafrance reappears, bare-breasted and without her thighscape, she's an imperturbable, if not particularly gracious hostess, maneuvering teapots and vessels and steaming water. Her helpers pass out the little sake cups of tea that she's poured, and remove them after we've taken our three sips. Then she carefully pours tea over her chest.

Fluids are featured in *Home*, as they seem to be in most rituals. Hieronimus removes her clothing, washes her feet in a basin, and furiously scrubs down the table. Later, she strips and bathes her whole body. Lafrance, striding along the table, brushes her teeth with alarming efficiency and spits the water into a bowl in front of her. People laugh and flinch when drops fly up. We wash our hands in shared bowls as the performance ends (we've been dipping pieces of cheesecloth in paste and sticking them on the supine Hieronimus's body until they resemble mummy wrappings).

Everything happens very ceremoniously. The discreet "waiters" bring and take away. I like it all, except the orders to do this or that (although I see the point of them). The monitored intimacy with another's body is strange. In one sequence, we dip black crayons in water and write on Hieronimus as she is pulled slowly along the table. Her composure is astonishing. I pick up her wrist and turn it to inscribe a bracelet of words; I wonder what it feels like to her. One person writes a phrase in her armpit, and my skin prickles. Later, it takes all my nerve to lay a piece of sticky white cloth over her nipple. Most of her chest is covered by then, and it looks cold; then I realize how much colder the cloth must feel.

Home ends when the assistants enfold Hieronimus in the white sheet she's lying on until she's truly mummified. I try not to think about that part. And there are other things to ponder: the images of the deer, of nature, of the body as private vessel and public space. Oddly, I don't wonder whether *Home* qualifies as dance. Part ritual, part installation, part inquiry into the spectator-performer alliance, part kindergarden art class, it evades labeling.