

Linder, *Bower of Bliss: An Improper Architecture*, 2020

Essay by Dr Amy Tobin, Associate Professor in History of Art at the University of Cambridge and Curator, Contemporary Programmes, Kettle's Yard

On the 14 March 2020 Linder realised a new performance in The Dome of Murray Edwards College, one of the colleges of the University of Cambridge, one of only two colleges for women and the home of The Women's Art Collection, the largest collection of art by women in Europe. This performance was the latest in a series of works by Linder, which take the title 'Bower of Bliss'. These Bowers have existed in various forms: as a flag and a film commissioned by Glasgow Women's Library and filmed at Chatsworth Estate; as a billboard and performance for Art on the Underground; and as an 'another Arcadia in a different kitchen' at the Design Museum in London. This Bower was commissioned by The Women's Art Collection and Kettle's Yard, as part of Linder's retrospective exhibition *Linderism*. Including a performance in the exhibition was an important means of representing the range of her artmaking away from what can be contained in galleries, and even in the idiosyncratic space of the Kettle's Yard House. Performances are often contingent or ineffable, but rarely are they so powerfully effective, rarely do they feel so magnetic.

Linder's performances are often formed like her photomontages of parts and fragments that come together. In the past Linder has called these works 'social collages', in which new connections are forged through seemingly odd juxtapositions. However dissonant these parts may seem before, in Linder's work they come to reverberate with new meaning and new possibility. In this way her performance works connect with the form and effect of something archaic like a ritual or a feast, enervating every sense so the viewer is wound into the experience, more than just a witness.





The *Bower of Bliss: An Improper Architecture* takes sensuality as a theme, as well as an effect of the performance. Specifically, it concerns the gendered association of feeling with femininity and rationality or thought with masculinity. Linder gestures to the ramifications of this distinction in history and in language, and reclaims the persecuted feminine realm as a space that may mean differently. This overturning was a long time coming. Linder first discovered the phrase 'Bower of Bliss' in the pages of the countercultural magazine *Oz*. Feminist writer Germaine Greer edited a *Women's Liberation* special issue of the publication in 1970, including a page of synonyms variously referring to the vagina, the clitoris and the womb, which Linder later used in 1981 for the lyrics of her song 'Vagina Gratitude' – the opposite of *Penis Envy*, she says – performed with her band *Ludus* on the DJ John Peel's famous BBC radio show. In the 1980s, Linder's listing of language used to describe women's bodies was a feminist gesture that both represented the damage done to women through naming, and a reclaiming of lost words, phrases and meanings that could be redeployed by women newly animated by the politics and critical ideas of feminism. Linder's return to the 'Bower of Bliss' recently speaks both to the legacies of those feminist politics and the necessary constant transformation of feminism. Here the 'Bower of Bliss' is summoned as a potential space capable of holding dissonant things together: safety and pleasure; joy and destruction; lament and celebration.



Linder, *Bower of Bliss: An Improper Architecture*, 2020. Photo: My Linh Le.

Linder's invocation of the 'Bower of Bliss' has specific resonances too. She brought the phrase back into her practice while working with Glasgow Women's Library and Chatsworth House simultaneously. The Women's Library was a place of safety and pleasure for its readers, but Chatsworth too had been a sanctuary for one very famous woman: Mary Queen of Scots, who lived there subject to the house arrest commanded by her cousin Queen Elizabeth I, and under the auspices of the Queen's friend Bess of Hardwick. Chatsworth still has Mary's bower intact, used for exercise during her internment.



Spread from Linder's sketchbook, 2018. Collection of Glasgow Women's Library.

This space, the house and the grounds of the Chatsworth Estate, form the *Bower of Bliss* we see in Linder's flag and film commissioned for, and displayed at, Glasgow Women's Library in 2018. The characters of Mary and Bess, portrayed by Lauren Fitzpatrick and Kirstin Halliday, were originated for this work and have been revived in later iterations of Linder's bowers. These figures are at times languorous and at others frenetic in their activity, their choreography speaks of pleasurable boredom and the anxious movement of confinement. Lauren Fitzpatrick, a long-term collaborator, breaks into Northern Soul sequences that, although a recurring refrain in Linder's work, take on a new inflection of resistance in her Mary Queen of Scots. We see this too in *Bower of Bliss: An Improper Architecture*, along with Kirstin Halliday's sprinting Bess and, for the first time in the Murray Edwards work, Lillian Wang's postures and attitudes as Britomart and Ashley Young's pacing, spinning and posing Acrasia. However, the characters of Acrasia and Britomart are not from the history books, but from Edmund Spenser's satirical reading of Elizabeth I's reign, *The Faerie Queene* (1590).



Linder, *Bower of Bliss: An Improper Architecture*, 2020, featuring Lauren Fitzpatrick, Kirstin Halliday, Lilian Wang and Ashley Young. Costumes by Louise Gray. Commissioned by Kettle's Yard with The Women's Art Collection as part of Linderism. Photo: My Linh Le.

In Spenser's allegorical epic poem, 'Bower of Bliss' appears again, describing the lair of the decadent Acrasia, sometimes thought to be a witch, who attempts to seduce the temperate Knight Guyon and is destroyed by him along with her Bower. Britomart appears in a different book of the poem, as the Knight of Chastity, who is strong, fearless and gender ambiguous, often being mistaken for a man. Linder's citation of *The Faerie Queene* in this performance brings together Spenser's polarising gendered characters: the wicked, deceitful woman Acrasia, and the virtuous, good woman Britomart, as well as the cousin Queens Mary and Elizabeth. In Linder's *Bower* the distinctions between these figures are confused, they interrelate and even support one another. Through clinging, holding and posing gestures allegorical characters mix with historical ones, witch with knight, warden with prisoner. Just as these roles are invoked, they are also undone in the performance, shown to be types that do not precisely fit anyone, but might reverberate through other, more contemporary, characters. They are ideas about gesture and performance that may limit, but can also be usefully transgressed. This undoing happens in the choreography – devised by the performers with Linder and in reference to the poses held in the artworks hanging in the Dome – but also in the costumes designed by Louise Gray, who also plays the role of Wardrobe Mistress in the performance, where she dresses and undresses the cast, and her companion Daddy Dyke, played by Gia Jones. Gray's presence as Wardrobe Mistress is suggestive of self-fashioning through the construction and reconstruction of clothing, that might be a blending of clothing for men and women, or parts of things that read as historical or contemporary, function and disfunction, matching and clashing. The Daddy Dyke sediments the fungibility of gender identity, a queer presence that parallels the mistaken masculinity of Britomart, and that refracts the deleterious potential of the *Bower* to undo even gender.



*Linder, Bower of Bliss: An Improper Architecture, 2020, featuring Louise Gray and Gia Jones.
Photo: My Linh Le.*







The various forms of performance and installation that Linder's *Bowers* take are temporary, but transformative. Like in a carnival, values shift, and relationships are reconfigured. Linder's eighty-five metre *Bower of Bliss* mural commissioned by Art on the Underground collided ancient and modern fragments excavated from London's deep geological layers or lost and found on the Underground onto a long horizontal surface.

Her performances collate references to similarly diverse sources that encompass myth, fairy tale, alchemy, ecology, allegory and Linder's own history. For *Bower of Bliss: An Improper Architecture* Linder layered fragments of choreography, sound and costume that merge across membranes. Characters peer at one another through Gray's patchworked lace; or gaze through a sieve as if it were a mirror.

Motifs of porousness connect with Linder's preoccupation with the negative characterisation of the feminine as messy and transgressive, subject to lascivious and leaky bodies that are both hyper-sexualised and anchored to reproduction. The sieve, or rather the miraculous sieve that holds water, is a recurring image in representations of chastity across history. It was emblematic of Tuccia, the vestal virgin, and co-opted by Elizabeth I, in her sieve portraits. Here Linder appropriates the functioning sieve as an interface and an invitation to connect and therefore to transgress beyond limits.



The prospect of pushing at boundaries and limits, specifically gendered ones, meets the aims of the New Hall Art Collection and Murray Edwards College to support and value women's contributions on their own terms. This performance reminds us of the rarity, and perhaps still the threat that organisations led by, or for, women present to the status quo and its hierarchies. Linder's subtitle 'An Improper Architecture' is taken from an early, critical description of Chamberlin, Powell and Bon's architecture for Murray Edwards College. 'An Improper Architecture' suggests a break with the architectural values of structural containment and linearity, which are troubled at Murray Edwards through large expanses of glass on the central walkways that let light flood in, the waterways that appear to circulate through the College, and the central Dome, housing the dining hall, around which the College and its gardens are organised. With its emphasis on movement and circulation, the College parallels Linder's sieve: it is an architectural membrane built around interaction rather than containment.

The conceit of the porous membrane in *Bower of Bliss: An Improper Architecture* took on a different valence during the week leading up to the performance, when social distancing measures were put in place to halt the spread of the coronavirus pandemic. Then the transgression of transmission took on a new and urgent meaning, necessarily distancing and lockdown were measures of social care. The membrane had a heightened meaning, it was both more threatening and a source of protection. Likewise, the perfume sprayed by Bess at the start of the performance took on a different sensibility, still a marking of space, but also now a potential fumigant. The performance took place on the cusp of the lockdown and the closure of both Murray Edwards College and Kettle's Yard, it was a final moment of being together at a distance, and already we had thought of new ways of reaching audiences who were self-isolating or who needed to be at home, by transmitting the performance live via Facebook. One of the last additions was Linder's presence in the performance. Near the beginning of the piece, she approached the mic and begins to make sub-semantic sounds; drawn-out laughter; gamakas and coughs. Wearing a mask, and a sheath of fabric from Gray's closet, Linder appeared disembodied, her vocal work injecting the *Bower* with threat and panic, piercing the delusion that the *Bower of Bliss* is only a space of joy.



Linder, *Bower of Bliss: An Improper Architecture*, 2020, featuring Ashley Young. Photo: My Linh Le.

Linder has said she had the god Pan in her mind when she approached the microphone, a figure who used sound as a means of hypnotic control. While Linder's earlier work with her band Ludus was organised around language and words mutated through Linder's variety of scale, pitch and delivery, then in this later work the voice was more unruly, something from the depths of the body, something chaotic. This sensibility was extended by Maxwell Sterling's composition, and particularly his improvisation on the double bass alongside Kenichi Iwasa on drums and horn. Sound provided a structure for the performance, establishing the space of the Bower, providing the triggers for moments of frenzy, interrelation, separation or rest. But it was also an improper architecture, collaging parts of soundworks made for the *Linderism* exhibition – including a new version of 'Vagina Gratitude' with a liturgy of synonyms in numerous different languages which played between the bedrooms of Kettle's Yard's co-founders Jim and Helen Ede – and the Inter Alios choir of Murray Edwards and Churchill colleges singing *Dido's Lament* (Henry Purcell, 1680). Iwasa's use of the gong signalled time in the performance and triggered the last section: the destruction of the bower, which its inhabitants undertake with their own hands, and was, rather than the obliteration of Acrasia's bower by the virtuous Guyon, a gesture of recreation and renewal.



Linder, *Bower of Bliss: An Improper Architecture*, 2020, featuring Linder, Kenichi Iwasa and Maxwell Sterling. Photo: My Linh Le.