

Introduction



IN 1892, LOIE FULLER (NÉE MARY-LOUISE FULLER, in Illinois) packed her theater costumes into a trunk and, with her elderly mother in tow, left the United States and a mid-level vaudeville career to try her luck in Paris. Within days of her arrival, she had secured an interview with Edouard Marchand, director of the Folies-Bergère. Alighting from her carriage in front of the theater, she stopped short at the sight of the large placard depicting the Folies' current dance attraction: a young woman waving enormous veils over her head, billed as the "serpentine dancer." "Here was the cataclysm, my utter annihilation," Fuller would later write, for she had come to the Folies that day precisely to audition her own, new "serpentine dance," an art form she had invented in the United States (fig. I.1).¹ The woman already performing this dance at the Folies turned out to be one Maybelle Stewart of New York City, an acquaintance of Fuller's who had seen her perform in New York City and, apparently, had liked what she had seen a little too much.²

Told that Marchand could speak with her only after Stewart's matinee, a horrified Fuller settled in to watch her imitator. Although initially "trembling" and covered with "cold perspiration," she soon overcame her anxiety, determining that Stewart was no match for her. "The longer she danced the calmer I became. I could gladly have kissed her for her . . . inefficiency."³ After the performance, Fuller put on her robes, took the stage in the now empty theater, and, with only one violinist left to accompany her, auditioned her own serpentine dance. By the end of the day, Marchand had granted Fuller a solo show of her own choreography and agreed to dismiss the imitator Stewart. However, since publicity for Stewart had already been circulated, and Marchand feared public protest, Fuller agreed to perform for the first two nights (October 28 and 29) under the name Maybelle Stewart, dancing her own imitation of Stewart's imitation of the serpentine dance. With this triple-layer simulation, worthy of an essay by Baudrillard, Loie Fuller launched her career as a modernist dance and performance artist. Although no one in Paris could have known it at the time, it was an ironically perfect beginning for

¹ Loie Fuller, *Fifteen Years of a Dancer's Life* (Boston: Small, Maynard & Co. Publishers, 1913), 53.

² Sally Sommer, "Loie Fuller," *Drama Review* 19, no. 1 (1975): 61.

³ Fuller, *Fifteen Years*, 54.



Figure I.1. Loie Fuller in early “Serpentine” costume, Bibliothèque Nationale de France

someone destined to construct her career around self-replication, mirrored images, and identity play.

On November 5, 1892, Loie Fuller, short, plump, and thirty years old, finally premiered under her own name at the Folies, a venue known at the time for its strippers, gymnasts, trapeze artists, and other circus-style, often bawdy acts.⁴

⁴ During her time there, Fuller would cross paths with such well-known Folies performers as Yvette Guilbert and the exotic dancer known as “La Belle Otéro.” (See Richard Current and Marcia Ewing Current, *Loie Fuller: Goddess of Light* [Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1997], 74.)

Swathed in a vast costume of billowing white Chinese silk that left only her face and hands visible, Fuller began her performance. Using rods sewn inside her sleeves, she shaped the fabric into gigantic, swirling sculptures that floated over her head. As she turned onstage, her arms lifted and molded the silk into undulating patterns. At the same time, rotating, colored spotlights dyed the silken images a variety of deep jewel tones. The audience saw not a woman, but a giant violet, a butterfly, a slithering snake, and a white ocean wave.⁵ Each shape rose weightlessly into the air, spun gently in its pool of changing, rainbow lights, hovered, and then wilted away to be replaced by a new form. After forty-five minutes, the last shape melted to the floorboards, Fuller sank to her knees, head bowed, and the stage went black. The audience was silent for a few seconds. When the lights went back on, Fuller reappeared to the thunderous applause that signaled the beginning of her triumphant new career.

By the next morning, all of Paris was talking about this “priestess of pure fire” and the *danses lumineuses* that had “transformed the Folies-Bergère,” in Marchand’s words, creating a “success without precedence in this theatre.”⁶ Fuller would perform at the Folies for an unheard-of three hundred consecutive nights, well launched on what was to become an unbroken thirty-year reign as one of Europe’s most wildly celebrated dancers.

But Fuller was an unlikely candidate for such stardom. She had had no formal training, and exhibited, frankly, little natural grace. There was nothing of the showgirl about her. “You should see her, she walks like a bird, but that bird is a duck,” wrote one reviewer.⁷ To say she was unglamorous is an understatement. Her round face, wide blue eyes, and short, stout body gave her a cherubic rather than sultry look. And at thirty, Fuller was nearly of retirement age for a music-hall dancer of that time. Offstage, she dressed haphazardly in oversized clothes, kept her hair in a tight bun, and wore little round spectacles. “She had a shapeless figure. She was an odd, badly dressed girl,” recalled Eve Curie (daughter of Marie and Pierre).⁸ “For heaven’s sake, fix yourself up; you’re

⁵ Fuller’s program for this first Folies-Bergère performance listed her dances as *Violet*, *Butterfly*, *The Serpentine*, and *La Danse blanche*.

⁶ Marchand went on to describe Fuller’s audience at the Folies: “Every night, the regular boulevard public is submerged in a crowd of scholars, painters, sculptors, writers, ambassadors. . . . All these people, forgetting their social rank and dignity, climb on tabletops like a group of kids” (qtd. in Giovanni Lista, *Danseuse de la Belle Epoque* (Paris: Editions Somogy, 1995): 133. See also Margaret Haile Harris, “Loie Fuller: The Myth, the Woman and the Artist,” *Arts in Virginia* 20, no.1 (1979): 18.

⁷ Qtd. in Loie Fuller, “The Walk of a Dancer,” unpublished manuscript, Loie Fuller papers, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts (henceforth noted as NYPLPA).

⁸ Qtd. in Frederic Grunfeld, *Rodin: A Biography* (New York: Henry Holt, 1987), 444.

a sight!”⁹ chastised one journalist who interviewed her. But such remarks never bothered Fuller, who seemed to take curious pride in her own ungainliness. She even begins her autobiography with a description of herself as a badly dressed infant, a “poor little waif” partially clad in a meager “yellow flannel garment.” She goes on to write, “I have likewise continued not to bother much about my personal appearance.”¹⁰ Despite her many decades in France, Fuller’s French (as attested to by her voluminous correspondence in the language) remained garbled and fractured all her life. To complete the picture, she never went anywhere without her ailing mother, whose dour countenance and austere dress conjured the pair’s hardscrabble past in the American Midwest so distant in every way from the music halls of fin-de-siècle Paris.¹¹

In other words, Fuller’s stardom owed nothing to the sexual glamour that, to this day, usually comprises the appeal of female performing artists. Fuller even managed to be openly lesbian while evoking virtually no titillation or disapproval in her public. Contemporary journalists tended to describe her personal life as “chaste,” and “correct,” writing often of her relationship with her mother and rarely even mentioning her live-in female companion of over twenty years, Gabrielle Bloch, a Jewish-French banking heiress who dressed only in men’s suits.

Nevertheless, when she stepped onstage, this overweight, ungraceful American woman vanished, replaced by her sequences of ephemeral sculptures. Routinely hidden by hundreds of yards of silk, Fuller manipulated her voluminous robes into swirling shapes above her head, transforming herself by turns into lilies, butterflies, raging fires, even the surface of the moon. Audiences were left breathless. What so captivated them was the unique amalgam of Fuller’s human agency, the creativity and force she exhibited as she wielded the enormous costumes; the power of her technology, the innovative stagecraft that she had designed and patented herself; and the oneiric, ephemeral landscapes evoked by this combination of body and machine, the disembod-

⁹ Qtd. in Loie Fuller, “Dead Ashes,” unpublished manuscript, Fuller collection, NYPLPA.

¹⁰ Fuller, *Fifteen Years*, 18–19.

¹¹ “And then there’s her mother,” wrote an acerbic Jean Lorrain in a review, “yes, in a little ermine jacket . . . rigid, erect, upright, who comes every night and sits right in front of the stage with an entire coterie of clergymen . . . you would think it was the Salvation Army. And there she is, pale, grey-lipped, . . . nearly ghostly, following Loie’s dances with her two big vacant eyes. . . . And, at the end, Loie, who dances only for her, leans over in her long white robes and from her high pedestal blows kisses to her mother. Isn’t that touching? Yes, a regular chapter out of Dickens.” Jean Lorrain, *Poussières de Paris* (Paris: Société d’Editions Littéraires et Artistiques, 1902), 195.

ied, rising and falling silken shapes. “She acquires the virginity of un-dreamt-of places,” wrote Mallarmé in his famous essay on Fuller.¹²

Fuller had invented an art form balanced delicately between the organic and the inorganic, playing out onstage a very literal drama of theatrical transformation. Unlike actors playing theatrical roles or costumed dancers portraying swans, fairies, or gypsies, Fuller hardly ever “played” or “portrayed.” Rather, in the vast majority of her performances she *became* the forms she described in silk, subsuming her physical self within them. Her work, therefore, drew upon and exaggerated a very deep aspect of performance: the magical, undecidable doubleness implied in any theatrical mimesis, what Diderot called the actor’s paradox: “One is oneself by nature; one is another by imitation; the heart you imagine for yourself is not the heart you have.”¹³

Contemporary reviews bear out the fact that Fuller’s power derived from her thrilling enactments of metamorphosis. Her capacity to merge with the realm of the nonhuman or the supernatural attracted the most critical attention. While most music-hall stars of the era garnered praise for their singing or dancing, their charm, or their beauty, Fuller earned accolades for her nearly supernatural transcendence of self. She was “Herculaneum buried beneath the ashes . . . the Styx and the shores of Hades . . . a terrifying apparition, some huge pale bird of the polar seas,” rhapsodized Jean Lorrain.¹⁴ Another reviewer imagined her as “something elemental and immense, like the tide or the heavens, whose palpitations imitated the most primitive movements of life . . . the vibrations of the first cell.”¹⁵

Virtually nothing about Fuller’s dowdy offstage persona or her physical self ever crept into her performances, but when occasionally something did, reviews could be unforgiving. Her 1895 dance-pantomime version of *Salome*, for example, met with critical failure—largely because it failed to keep an overweight and visibly sweating Fuller under wraps or at a suitable distance from the audience. In other words, although she would become famous as a “*Salome moderne*” for her veil-like costumes, Fuller failed to impress audiences as an in-character Salome, having “lost that aura of unreality, ineffability, and

¹² Stéphane Mallarmé, “Les Fonds dans le ballet,” *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1979), 308.

¹³ Denis Diderot, *Selected Writings on Art and Literature*, trans. Geoffrey Bremer (London: Penguin, 1994), 141. (Original entitled “Le Paradoxe du comédien,” written in 1773, first published in 1830).

¹⁴ Qtd. in Philippe Jullian, *The Triumph of Art Nouveau*, trans. Stephen Hardman (New York: Larousse, 1974), 89–90.

¹⁵ Francis Miomandre, *Danse* (Paris: Flammarion, 1935), 15.

mystery“ on which her appeal depended.¹⁶ Biographer Giovanni Lista refers to the problem as the “collapse of magic into the banal.”¹⁷ But so long as Fuller kept her somewhat graceless self out of sight, and centered her performance on her technological genius, she dazzled her crowds, succeeding as more of an Electric Salome than a biblical one.

Since her offstage self did not jibe with her onstage appeal, Fuller never achieved the convergence of life and art that would come to mark the age of media stardom. This is not to say, however, that her personality did not play a crucial role in her career. On the contrary, Fuller’s offstage persona, with its odd admixture of magical child and unthreatening matron, only helped endear her to the public. She was perceived as a kind of whimsical, female version of Thomas Edison, a mad lady scientist, known as “*la fée électricité*.” She lent her face and name to soap and perfume advertisements. Her costumes were copied and sold as streetwear at the Bon Marché and Louvre department stores. Women bought “Loie” skirts and scarves; men sported “Loie ties.” Bar patrons sipped “Loie cocktails.” Fuller, a savvy businesswoman, even sold likenesses of herself in theater lobbies, in the form of lamps, figurines, and other household objects. Later in her career, she tried her hand at the newest and most powerful form of mass culture—cinema—and made several films, working with luminaries such as Pathé, the Lumière brothers, and Georges Méliès.

Fuller managed then, to reify herself offstage, commodifying her image by marketing and multiplying her persona, just as onstage she transformed her physical body into countless, reproducible shapes. In this way, she qualifies as a direct forerunner of today’s modern media celebrities. She cannily created both an art form and a commercial business that exploited her era’s fascination with the alchemy inherent in the union of human and machine. Indeed, Henry Adams might have been thinking of Fuller’s effect on audiences when he explored, in *The Virgin and the Dynamo*, the nearly religious ecstasy that technology inspired during the late nineteenth century. Fuller was neither entirely human, not entirely machine, but an onstage enactment of the *fin de siècle*’s—and modernism’s—newly blurred boundaries between these realms.¹⁸

The *fin de siècle* dismantled also much of the boundary between high and low or popular culture; and Fuller’s career typified this new fluidity as well. She was what we would call today a “crossover artist,” poised between the

¹⁶ Current and Current, *Loie Fuller*, 80.

¹⁷ Lista, *Danseuse*, 192.

¹⁸ “Modern technology collapsed the vault of heaven. Never before . . . did the heavens seem to be so close or so accessible, a place . . . for human bodies in manmade machines.” Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space 1880–1918* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 317. See also Mark Seltzer, *Bodies and Machines* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

music hall and the concert or recital stage and devoting her life to bringing increased respect and status to dance as an art in itself.¹⁹ She succeeded, to a large extent, in bridging both social and artistic chasms. The working-class cabaret audiences loved her; but she was equally beloved of the aristocracy. Europe's wealthy and powerful flocked to see her at the Folies, as well as on the stages of the Odéon, the Olympia, and the Athénée. These luminaries made for unfamiliar customers in such populist venues. A journalist for *L'Echo de Paris* wrote: "There is nothing so curious as the . . . change . . . in the clientele of the Folies Bergère. One now sees black dress coats . . . carriages decorated with coats of arms; the aristocracy is lining up to applaud Loie Fuller."²⁰ And the upper class's interest in Fuller extended beyond the theaters. The Vanderbilts, the Rothschilds, and even Queen Marie of Romania sought her out as a friend and frequent houseguest, inviting Fuller to use their villas and manicured gardens as stages for her works.

Along with the aristocracy, European high culture embraced "la Loie" and used her often as an object of aesthetic contemplation. Mallarmé and Yeats wrote of her; René Lalique, Emile Gallé, and Louis Comfort Tiffany fashioned her image in glass and crystal objects; Pierre Roche sculpted her in marble. Massenet and Debussy composed music for her; Whistler painted her; and her close friend Auguste Rodin made bronze casts of her hands. Fuller even fascinated the world of academic science, gaining the admiration and friendship of Marie and Pierre Curie, as well as of astronomer Camille Flammarion, all of whose laboratories she regularly visited. Flammarion even arranged for Fuller to become a member of the French Astronomical Society for her investigations into the physical properties of light.²¹ In 1924, the Louvre itself honored Fuller, with a 24-piece exhibition of her work, focusing on her experiments with light and fabric.²²

Given this degree of celebrity and wide sweep of artistic influence, one might have expected Loie Fuller to remain in the cultural imagination long after her

¹⁹ Lynn Garafola, *Diaghilev's Ballets Russes* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1989), 16, 44. Also, Sally Banes, *Writing Dancing in the Age of Postmodernism* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1994), 90.

²⁰ Unsigned review, *L'Echo de Paris*, 26 Nov. 1892.

²¹ Bud Coleman, "The Electric Fairy: The Woman behind the Apparition of Loie Fuller," in *Staging Desire: Queer Readings of American Theater History*, ed. Kim Marra and Robert A. Schanke (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 314.

²² The exhibition was called "Retrospective on Studies in Form, Line and Color for Light Effects, 1892–1924," and featured costumes worn by Fuller, some of which were on loan from the private collections of Rudolph Valentino and the Baron de Rothschild (Current and Current, *Loie Fuller*, 302).

death in 1928. But this did not happen. Although Fuller would choreograph 128 dances between 1892 and 1925 and die a wildly famous woman, she quickly faded from popular consciousness. Today, it is largely only scholars who are familiar with her work. The general, educated public has lost sight of her.

The factors depriving Fuller of lasting fame are the very factors that made her such a household name during her lifetime: her whimsical but unglamorous persona, her technical genius, and the uncategorizable nature of her art itself. By not fitting into established and narrow parameters for female performers, by branching out into such overwhelmingly male fields as stage design, mechanical invention, and filmmaking, and by straddling both music-hall and “high” culture concert dance, Fuller left no ready “hook” on which to hang memories of her. While too different not to be noticed in life, Fuller may have also been too different to be noticed after she was gone.

And then there is the work itself. What made the crowds gasp when Fuller was onstage was never Fuller as a recognizable individual. They gasped, rather, at the conversion of her physical self into pure aesthetic form. In essence, Fuller made a career of staging her own immateriality, dissolving into light projections on fabric. While this lent a definite proto-cinematic quality to her stage work, and while she did make several films, even Fuller’s proximity to cinema did little to keep her fame alive. Like her stage work, Fuller’s films never emphasized her individual identity. They consisted mostly of Fuller — and later, sometimes troupes of young dancers she gathered—performing in much the same way she did on stage, with dissolving shapes and shifting shadows rendered even more effective through the magic of the camera. In the end, perhaps, it should not surprise us that an artist who took such pleasure in playing at disappearance should vanish so effectively after her death.

Fuller does, however, retain a reputation among scholars, some of whom have done important work in reconstructing her career. Among these, Sally Sommer and Giovanni Lista stand out for their thorough and painstaking archival work. Lista in particular has produced an impressive scholarly volume that reconstructs Fuller’s entire career and lays out compelling arguments for her influence on and proximity to movements and aesthetic forms as wide-ranging as Art Nouveau, Futurism, Surrealism, Japanese line drawing, and even American transcendentalism. Margaret Haile Harris and H el ene Pinet-Cheula have each put together beautiful exhibitions and catalogues of Fuller’s work; and Richard and Marcia Current have written a highly readable, general-interest biography of Fuller.

In addition to the few individual studies on her, virtually all histories of modern dance devote a preliminary page or two to Fuller, usually describing

her as a forerunner of more famous dancers.²³ Theater scholars mention her as an inventor who prefigured much of the modernist stage theory and practice to come, including the work of E. Gordon Craig, Adolphe Appia, Ernst Stern, Filippo Marinetti, and Enrico Prampolini.²⁴ In other words, critics tend to relegate Fuller to “pioneer status”; that is, they regard her as the earliest manifestation of a vast array of modernist developments including performing recital dance with no balletic technique, discarding constricting costumes and elaborate stage sets, using classical music for cabaret dance, downplaying narrative, working with light and shadow onstage in proto-cinematic fashion, and incorporating electricity and technology into her onstage work. Such observations are, of course, accurate. Fuller was indeed a progenitor of modern dance and an interdisciplinary artist stretching well beyond the confines of dance and into the realms of visual art, mechanical reproduction, stage design, and film. I shall address many of these contributions later.

But enumerating Fuller’s innovations is insufficient. Nor is it enough merely to point to similarities between her work and that of subsequent artists. Such cataloguing of comparisons reduces the history of performance to a simplistic and linear narrative of “modernism” in which stage sets become steadily more mechanized or geometric and performers move in increasingly “free” or “abstract” fashion. Furthermore, within such a paradigm, Fuller ranks consistently as “precursor” and little more, receiving attention only for having anticipated the modernist flourishes of later, more famous artists. Of her contributions to stage lighting, for example, the *Larousse Encyclopédie du théâtre* declares Fuller “no more than a point of departure.”²⁵ Such contextualizing criticism fails to attend closely enough to what Fuller was actually *doing* with these modernist trappings, or how she used them to confront, on many subtle levels, such key issues as the dialogue between dance and dramatic theater, the changing role of psychological character in modernism, politics and ethnic identity, and sexuality. By the same token, little has been written about Fuller’s relationship

²³ See, for example, Marcia Siegel, *The Shapes of Change: Images of American Modern Dance* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979); see also Garafola, *Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes*; Baner, *Writing Dancing*; and Julia Foulkes, *Modern Bodies: Dance and American Modernism from Martha Graham to Alvin Ailey* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

²⁴ See Giovanni Lista, “Prampolini scenografia,” in *Prampolini: Dal futurismo all’informale* (Rome: Edizioni Carte Segrete, 1992), 108–44; Denis Bablet, *Esthétique générale du décor du théâtre de 1870 à 1914* (Paris: Editions du Centre de la Recherche Scientifique, 1965); and Jacques Baril, *La Danse moderne* (Paris: Editions Vigot, 1977).

²⁵ Paul Léon, “Art du théâtre,” in *Encyclopédie du théâtre*, section 10, *Photographie et Cinématographie* (Paris: Editions Larousse, 1955), 26.

to what came before her, namely *earlier* dance history, specifically ballet, of which her work is seen—incorrectly—as a total rejection.

More interesting work on Fuller has been done of late by those who explore her status as a “queer” artist, finding lesbian subtexts in her ostensibly chaste and bodiless performances. “Fuller . . . staged a presence that was specifically lesbian. . . . Audiences were never sure, in all the lights and swirls of fabric, exactly what her body was doing, where it was, or even exactly how many bodies were on stage,” writes Tirza True Latimer.²⁶ “Fuller resembles a witch or a sorcerer far more than a seductress,” observes Sally Banes; “perhaps partly because she was an openly identified lesbian, she shunned the provocative female representation of enticement so closely identified with ‘the dancing girl.’”²⁷ And Julie Townsend writes: “[Fuller’s] experience and representation of her body as transformative could instead be read as a strategy with lesbian implications. By constructing herself as Other (insect, serpent, butterfly, etc.), Fuller removed herself from the realm of gender altogether.”²⁸ Such readings of Fuller’s work are overdue, since until recently scholars have been curiously accepting of Fuller’s apparent sexlessness. Her occulting of her physical body and her eschewal of overt eroticism have led critics to disregard wrongly the powerful bodiliness that nonetheless existed in Fuller’s performances. For this reason, Fuller’s work cries out to be “queered.” Scholars such as Townsend and Latimer clearly perform important interpretive work, for they are putting the sexual body back into an art form seemingly hell-bent on its disappearance. Yet it is limiting to look only for lesbian or gay subtexts when studying a performer like Fuller whose appeal was so widespread and long lasting. Fuller’s queerness comprises but one part of the unspoken physicality of her work. Furthermore, some of these approaches to Fuller seem oddly to dismantle their own goal, rediscovering Fuller’s sexuality only then to subtract the body yet again, equating queerness—at least in the case of *lesbian* queerness—with the suppression of the body. To say that Fuller performed lesbian sexuality by virtue of removing her fleshly self from the stage is to err on two counts. First, it suggests that Fuller’s body actually had no part in the construction of her performances or in the powerful appeal they held. Second, it makes of lesbian sexuality an absence, a refusal of eros rather than an alternative expression of it.

²⁶ Tirza True Latimer, “Loie Fuller: Butch Femme Fatale,” in *Proceedings of the Society of Dance History Scholars, 22nd Annual Conference* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1999), 86.

²⁷ Banes, *Writing Dancing*, 74.

²⁸ Julie Townsend, “Alchemic Visions and Technological Advances: Sexual Morphology in Loie Fuller’s Dance,” in *Dancing Desires: Choreographing Sexualities on and off the Stage*, ed. Jane C. Desmond (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001), 76.

Perhaps the most interesting work on Fuller has been that of Felicia McCarren, whose 1998 book, *Dance Pathologies*, locates Fuller in the interstices of nineteenth-century poetics and medical and psychoanalytic practices. McCarren looks at Mallarmé's use of Fuller as performer of his modernist notion of the disembodied "idea"; she then uses Fuller to place Mallarmé within the context of the psychoanalytic theatricalization of the "pathological" (hysterical) female body. McCarren accomplishes this by uncovering the resonances between Mallarmé's discussion of Fuller's multiplicity (of onstage shapes and offstage personae) and the discourse of hypnosis, in which multiple, "alternative" and unconscious selves were placed in medical mises-en-scène:

Fuller's subjectivity hinges on her movement between an onstage and an offstage persona, and her dance allows that doubleness to multiply. She produces . . . a series of constantly changing images . . . not because she pretends to be them . . . but because her stage image makes it possible for the viewer to imagine them. In Mallarmé's writing, Fuller becomes an "inconsciente révélatrice" of his mystical literary system, of the visual but invisible "idée" and of the subjectivity that system presupposes: "unconscious" because onstage she becomes a Sign, unaware of her literary potential and unable to manipulate language herself "knowing no eloquence other" than her steps.²⁹

For McCarren, Fuller's art form partakes of the nineteenth century's discovery of "visual knowledge of the body" (the term is Foucault's), and she sees in Fuller's onstage floating funnel-like shapes "uncanny resemblance to . . . illustrations of a uterus."³⁰ For McCarren: "Fuller's work de-anatomizes femininity, redefining it as movement rather than structure." In Fuller's movement away from structure and toward motion, McCarren finds an analogue to Charcot's theories on hysteria, which similarly moved away from an anatomical view of hysteria's etiology (the wandering uterus theory) to a dynamic, corporealized explanation.³¹

²⁹ Felicia McCarren, *Dance Pathologies* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 155.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 166.

³¹ "[Fuller's] dance parallels Charcot's shift from the traditional 'uterine' theory of hysteria to a neurophysiological one, in which physiological processes are not governed by hidden anatomical structures and hysteria is not corporealized in the womb (*ibid.*, 166). Curiously, Frank Kermode, in his very lyrical (and not particularly psychoanalytic) essay on Fuller, "Loie Fuller: Poet and Dancer before Diaghilev," draws a parallel similar to McCarren's. After noting that the Parisian music hall was "as important in the early history of modern art as folk music and primitive painting," he goes on to recall that Jane Avril, the famous cabaret singer, was once a patient of Charcot's at the Salpêtrière, noting that this famous hospital "was used as a kind of alternative to

McCarren also reminds us that Fuller's use of electricity further allied her with the practices of early, pre-Freudian psychoanalysis while also gesturing toward Freud's later practices:

Fuller's work responds to the medical and cultural linking of dance and hysteria by using the clinician's tools: hypnosis and electricity. Although her work thus asks to be read in the context of Charcot's cures, and she uses, significantly, those techniques that Freud would discontinue in psychoanalysis, she uses them to such radically different ends that her goals seem more closely to resemble those that Freud will adopt. . . . Fuller can make into art what is, in the psychiatric hospital, only symptom; she can express what the hysterical patient represses. . . . Loie Fuller's dancing can be understood . . . as a successful or healthy theatricalization of what Freud calls early on "double conscience" or "hysterical dissociation" (the splitting of consciousness).³²

Reading Fuller's work in light of psychoanalytic inquiry makes sense. Her performances problematized the desiring female body, recreating it aesthetically and questioning the objectifying gaze of the spectator. And, as McCarren also mentions, Fuller was aware of her own proximity to hypnosis, and remarked often on the hypnotic effect of her dancing. But McCarren's book ends its chapter on Loie Fuller with the announcement (quoted above) of Fuller's proximity to Freud—a provocative yet insufficient observation. Furthermore, McCarren suggests that Fuller somehow resolves, through dance, the splitting of the hysteric subject, that Fuller's dance physically enacts the Freudian ideal of a fully narrativized conflict. For McCarren, Fuller performs a "working through," a "healthy theatricalization," as she calls it.

Leaving off here ties up Fuller's—and Freud's—loose ends a little too neatly. Fuller may successfully perform, as McCarren suggests, a "healthy" version of the nineteenth-century hysteric ("what the hysterical patient tries and fails to say"), but that is not the end of the story. McCarren's work partakes of a curious phenomenon that pervades studies on Fuller: the propensity to see her as an "antidote" of one kind or another. From the beginning of her career, Fuller managed to inspire critics of every stripe to view her as a correction of various—sometimes totally contradictory—ills. We can see this impulse in McCarren's version of Fuller as a "healthy hysteric" and in Townsend's or

music-hall." (Frank Kermode, "Loie Fuller Poet and Dancer before Diaghilev," *Salmagundi*, 33–34 (Spring–Summer, 1976): 28–29; an earlier, shorter version appears in *Theatre Arts*, September 1962, 6–22.) McCarren does not mention Kermode in her book.

³² McCarren, *Dance Pathologies*, 168–69.

Latimer's "queered" Fuller. The former reading restores power to the victimized hysteric; the latter reading restores a kind of sexual truth, and undoes the injustice of historical closeting. In all cases, though, Fuller represents a desired restitution of some kind of sexual health or authenticity.

For some reviewers of her own time, Fuller offered an opposite yet equally antidotal model: for them, she provided chaste correction for the *louche* tastes of French cabaret audiences, a salutary *re*-closeting, that is, of an overly free sexuality. Journalist Paul Adam, for example, wrote of Fuller: "Nothing bestial remains. Here may die then the *gaudriole* and the *bon esprit gaulois*. How wonderful that these vulgar souls don't tire of [Fuller], and though drawn by the hope of erotic poses, they are satisfied with higher things. In this way debauchery marches toward its redemption."³³ "Miss Fuller has done wonders in improving the public taste, and proving that dancing is not an art that degrades," wrote another journalist in approval of Fuller's onstage modesty.³⁴

On the other hand, not all contemporary critics applauded Fuller's bodily restraint. Some welcomed what they saw as her liberation of the body. For them, she was the antidote to the artificial constraints of ballet, a pure return to nature. Jules Clarétie declared of Fuller: "She no more learned to dance than she learned to breathe."³⁵ In 1922, one critic wrote, "No need to look here for the virtuosity of pointe work or leaps . . . this is a new rite of dance"³⁶ "To the devil with the turnouts, *entre-chats*, and *jetés*," wrote another enthusiastic reviewer.³⁷ And then there were the centrists, for whom Fuller was a kind of savior Goldilocks who rejected both the too-hot dances of the music hall and the too-cold ones of the ballet: "she delivers dance from both the cancan and the tutus," wrote Michel-Georges Michel, for example.³⁸

For yet a different camp of critics, Fuller provided an even more dramatic "antidote." For these, she pried open a window of transcendence, representing escape from the greatest constraint of all: mortal, fallen human life. Her life-

³³ Paul Adam, review of Loie Fuller, *Le Courier de la Presse*, 13 February 1893, 6, Musée Rodin archives.

³⁴ Mrs. M. Griffith, "Loie Fuller: The Inventor of the Serpentine Dance," *Strand Magazine*, Winter 1894, 540.

³⁵ Jules Clarétie, review of Loie Fuller, Fuller papers, NYPLPA.

³⁶ Marcel Rieu, "Miss Loie Fuller inaugure des ballets fantastiques," 10 June 1922, Fuller papers, NYPLPA.

³⁷ Louis Vauxcelles, "L'Art de Loie Fuller," 10 May 1914, Collection Rondel on Loie Fuller, Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, Paris (hereafter, Collection Rondel).

³⁸ Qtd. in Lista, *Danseuse*, 294. See also Silvagni who writes, "There were only two kinds of dance before Loie Fuller: classical and Toulouse-Lautrec, one is stiff, the other degrading." (Silvagni, "L'Etonnante vie de la fée de la lumière," *Pour Tous*, 20 September 1953, Musée Rodin Archives).

long friend and admirer, critic Claude Roger-Marx, saw Fuller as a “glimpse of the ideal, removed from time and place.”³⁹ Another contemporary critic believed: “she is not a human being.”⁴⁰ Camille Mauclair exulted: “Loie Fuller tears us away from . . . everyday life and leads us to purifying dreamlands.”⁴¹ Watching Fuller dance, Paul Adam felt he had experienced “a return to Eden.”⁴²

If we divide critical responses to Fuller into two main camps, the interpretive-theoretical (exemplified by McCarren) and the scholarly-historical (exemplified by Banes or Lista, for example), we see that even the latter group demonstrates this tendency to view Fuller as “antidote,” in this case, the bracing antidote of “newness,” the turning over of a new theatrical leaf. These scholars, of course, seek neither a metaphoric return to psychical health nor an edenic purity in her dances. Instead, they see in Fuller’s work a line of demarcation, or a clearly pivotal moment where ballet disappears and modern dance begins.

Susan Foster, for example, tells us that Fuller “introduced radical new movement vocabularies and . . . detonated the ballet stage.”⁴³ Elizabeth Kendall views Fuller as a “doorway to revolution,” one of the rare individuals who spark radical change.⁴⁴ Other critics go even further, making of Fuller the symbol of an entire century. Recalling Fuller’s prominence at the World’s Fair of 1900, the great Jean Cocteau wrote:

I retain only one vibrant image from the *Exposition Universelle* . . . Mme Loie Fuller . . . a fat, ugly American woman with glasses atop a pedestal maneuvering great waves of supple silk . . . creating innumerable orchids of light and fabric unfurling, rising, disappearing, turning, floating. . . . Let us all hail this dancer who . . . created the phantom of an era.⁴⁵

Even as recently as 1988, one enthusiastic French journalist opined that “By the end of the nineteenth century, Loie Fuller had already invented everything . . . cinematic art . . . electric art . . . abstract art, [and] ‘all-over’ art.”⁴⁶

³⁹ Claude Roger-Marx, “Loie Fuller,” *Les Arts et la Vie*, May 1905, 3.

⁴⁰ Miomandre, *Danse*, 16.

⁴¹ Camille Mauclair, *Idées vivantes* (Paris: Librairie de l’Art Ancien et Moderne, 1904), 104.

⁴² Adam, *Le Courrier de la Presse*, 6.

⁴³ Susan Foster, *Choreography and Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 261.

⁴⁴ Elizabeth Kendall, “1900: A Doorway to Revolution,” *Dance Magazine*, January 1999, 81.

⁴⁵ Jean Cocteau, *Souvenirs* (Paris: Editions Flammarion, 1935), 5.

⁴⁶ Untitled article on Loie Fuller, *Libération*, 22 September 1988 (Musée d’Orsay collection of documents on Loie Fuller).

What is it then that prompts so many of Fuller's critics to cast her in such light? How does she manage to occupy the apparently paradoxical position of "fat, ugly American woman" and founding mother of a century of modernism? For an answer, we should perhaps look to the specifics of Fuller's art form. Essentially what she did was swath her body in white silks and then shine images upon them. In other words, she became a projection screen. But the screen functioned as more than just a site for the images and lights beamed down by Fuller's electricians. It served also as hypnotic tabula rasa for her spectators, prompting the countless descriptions of her work as "sorcery" or "magic" and inducing that initial hushed silence at the end of her performances. In this sense, Fuller's dances seem to have offered audiences a metaphoric screen on which to project their own unconscious fantasies, hypnotizing with a power akin to that of rushing ocean waves or the dancing flames in a fireplace.

This hypnotic effect finds a counterpart in the claims about Fuller by critics and scholars. To see Loie Fuller as the "phantom of an era," "a dead yet perfect being," the inventor "of everything," or even as a "detonator" of ballet, is to fall a bit under her hypnotic spell. Fuller's genius lay in appearing radically "other" than her plump, dowdy self, in the dazzling obscuring of human effort behind the ephemeral shapes and colors. Perhaps, had she not been matronly but sleek and sylphlike instead, and therefore less "transformed" onstage, Fuller would have been less successful, for her magic depended upon beautiful forms emerging (seemingly) out of nowhere, with no logical provenance. Consequently, her critics sometimes see *Fuller herself* as arising from nowhere, floating down to earth to do away with past forms of theater or dance or to inaugurate a hundred different art forms. Critically hypnotized, they project radical newness onto Fuller, severing her from her context. The same is true for those who find "correction" or "antidote" in Fuller's work. They are projecting onto her blank screen their own critical desires, be they for uplifting chastity, freer bodily movement, staged psychoanalytic success, or coded lesbian performance. (Some critics and scholars fall prey to several of these tendencies at once.)

It would be comically wrong-headed here (but so easy) to claim that *Electric Salome* will wipe clean the slate of prior interpretations of Fuller, rousing the field at last from this critical trance. Obviously, such an approach would only reproduce the problem, using Fuller yet again to turn a page or mark some new definitive transition. Furthermore, I do not wish to imply that scholarly work on Fuller has been wrong. All of the critics mentioned above have made valuable contributions, grounded in careful study. But in attributing to Fuller so much radical newness or "correction," these writers tend to exempt her

from critical dialogue with other artists and genres. By demonstrating both Fuller's radical otherness—however they define the term—and (somewhat paradoxically) Fuller's close proximity to so many movements, scholars have managed to overlook her deep *connectedness* to and relationship with dance and theater history, not as “detonator” or “pioneer,” but as interlocutor.

Taking a step back to look at Fuller in a broader context, we might see that the history of all modernism is replete with the same kinds of narratives of rupture that subtend Fuller's career. We know and retell so many stories of shocked art critics (such as those first viewers of Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*), or scandalized theater patrons (at the opening of *Ubu Roi*, for example). We imagine cultural chasms between Petipa and Duncan or between Scribe and Pirandello. But, we also know of course that modernist art forms did not just spring autochthonously to life to exile all that had preceded them. Rather, they evolved out of earlier art forms, even while occasionally causing shock in spectators. Loie Fuller affords us a unique opportunity to see played out in microcosm several of the key transitions to modernist performance, because *she embodies them*. Careful attention to her work reveals, for example, that she performed the transition from ballet to modern dance, retaining and transforming elements of each and thereby revealing the profound connections between the two genres. In fact, Fuller's work allows us to witness the ongoing conversation between ballet and modern dance. Similarly, although she is rarely discussed in this context, Fuller acted out onstage much of the problematics of modern European drama: the struggle between breaking or maintaining the coherence of characters, the question of how or whether to portray psychological depth, the dilemma of the “fourth wall,” the debate over acknowledging the audience, and the role of costume and the body onstage.

Accordingly, *Electric Salome* will place Fuller in deeper, more critical dialogue with dance and drama, proceeding first from an examination of the element most often ignored in her work: what I shall call her secret “danciness.” I refer here to Fuller's profound yet largely unexamined relationship to actual, bodily dancing, to onstage bodily reality and, by extension, to certain contemporaneous developments in modern theater, beyond those in stagecraft alone. I intend to demonstrate how Fuller helps us understand the way in which different genres of modernist performance “speak” to one another.

With these goals in mind, I shall devote myself largely to examining Fuller in a series of critical relationships. After an introductory first chapter explaining the bases of Fuller's art, chapter 2 addresses her work within the context of a major movement of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century entertainment: Orientalist performance, with its crucial subtext of French imperialism. As a “modern Salome” who staged and starred in two different produc-

tions of the biblical story (in 1895 and again in 1907), Fuller partook heavily of her era's Orientalism. But critics have rarely examined the political ramifications of this aspect of her work, viewing Fuller's Orientalism as a kind of sanitized "borrowing." In part, this is because Fuller seems too high-tech, too asexual, too white, and too "unforeign" to be compared to such "exotic" and scantily clad dancers as the era's popular Algerian troupe, the Ouled-Nayl. But despite her modernist and ostensibly chaste trappings, Fuller does not eschew the mess of politics or history. On the contrary, as we shall see, Fuller responded to and reinterpreted certain key racial, national, and sexual complexities of her moment in popular culture. This chapter focuses particularly on Fuller's place at the heavily imperialist Paris World's Fair of 1900, where, I believe, her apparent political neutrality helped further the French government's colonialist aims.

Chapter 3 moves on to Fuller's relationship to Romantic ballet. This discussion involves reassessing what counted as body and muscle in Fuller's performance. I shall argue, in fact, that one must begin by reading her thin, pointed batons and the attached billowing veils as prosthetic inversions of the ballerina's legs on pointe and the Romantic tutu. Once we see the startling analogy between Fuller's onstage physical structure and that of the ballerina, we can see how, rather than "detonate" the ballet stage, Fuller embraced and reworked it.

From Romantic ballet, I shall move on to the other end of dance spectrum: high modern dance. Specifically, chapter 4 situates Fuller's work in the context of Martha Graham's revolution. Here once again, Fuller's odd position between high modernist art and "low" popular or mass culture has deterred critics from studying the real, artistic relationship that exists between her work and that of more "serious" artists. As I have noted, critics generally content themselves with citing Fuller as a precursor to modern dance (both Graham's and others'), but rarely examine her choreography very closely. This chapter juxtaposes one of Fuller's later works, *The Sea*, with Graham's landmark work, the mournful and haunting *Lamentation* (1930). *The Sea* is a group work performed by Fuller's troupe of young dancers, and is one of a series of pieces that involved the use of a vast collective silk veil that entirely concealed all of the dancers' bodies. Completely invisible beneath the material, Fuller's dancers used their bodies to mold the fabric from beneath into a series of mutating sculptural shapes, forcing the audience to view the enormous veil as an animate, dancing being. In Graham's *Lamentation*, the dancer remains encased from head to toe in an elasticized fabric tube, against which she struggles to extend her limbs and delineate three-dimensional forms. Placed side by side, these two works not only reveal the significant parallels between Fuller and

Graham, but also shed new light on the role of gravity, space, and even physics in modern dance.

This pairing of Fuller and Graham serves as a departure point for chapter 5, which treats Fuller's largely unexamined relationship to modern drama, particularly the work of such artists as Ibsen, Strindberg, and Pirandello. Just as Fuller's work deeply engaged the physical body she appeared to spurn, so was it especially invested in the notions of dramatic character that it ostensibly rejected. While Fuller often receives scholarly acknowledgment for her influence on modernist theorists and stage designers, no one has examined how she prefigures and performs certain key developments in modern drama, including the dismantling and reconfiguring of "character," the new use of stage space, and naturalism. Looking, for example, at the projected slides of human cancer cells that Fuller used to "decorate" her costumes, we can find a version of modern drama's quest to stage the interiority of the physical self, new ways to reveal bodily truth. And when Fuller installed a wall of transparent glass between herself and the audience, dancing behind it as if unaware of its presence, did she not succinctly sum up the whole debate about the theater's "fourth wall"?

Finally, in the Afterword, *Electric Salome* looks at Fuller's continuing influence and legacy in the contemporary arena. Here, I shall consider recent choreography by a young artist named Jody Sperling who uses Fuller's dances as a springboard for her own postmodern fantasies, as well as an underground party entertainment known as "flagging," which is uncannily reminiscent of Fuller's work.