Everything is Permitted: Transgressions in Contemporary Performance Art

Elif Su Yılmaz

University of Alberta

Department of Art and Design

History of Art, Design, and Visual Culture

December, 2024

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Introduction

Transgression has become "a key idea," and consequently, a buzzword, in our contemporary moment, used to indicate thresholds of acceptance and rejection, deemed legitimate due to the individual's organic relation to a broader group that upholds similar principles of admissibility.[1] It is a concept that operates on various registers of assumption, about the existence, positionality, and nature of boundaries, which must exist a priori for transgression to take place. It is therefore closely related to the notion of "culture," which can be defined as the shared set and/or system of values, beliefs and practices of a group of people who are traditionally (especially before the rise of the internet which globalized the world in previously inconceivable ways) in close physical proximity and have had similar experiences in life.[2]

For transgression to take place, there must be in existence a form that is considered correct, favourable, proper, decent, and authorized, by some consensus. The legitimacy and pervasiveness of the consensus determines the severity and consequence of the transgression. This is how, some transgressive acts (such as cultural appropriation, police violence, and even rape), which often - as displays of power- target so-called minorities including women, are allowed to fly under the radar of societal condemnation; it is

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[1] Chris Jenks, *Transgression* (London: Routledge, 2003) summary on back page.

[2] The term "culture" has different implications across various fields. My understanding of the concept is informed by Stuart Hall's emphasis in *Representations*, a key resource for my dissertation, that culture is not a set of things but a set of practices that create meanings which are shared by a group of people. "Culture…is involved in all those practices which are not simply genetically programmed into us -like the jerk of the knee when tapped- but which carry meaning and value for us, which need to be *meaningfully interpreted* by others, or which depend on meaning for their effective operation." Culture is therefore highly performative as well as relational, an insight confirmed by performance theorist, ethnographer and social justice activist Dwight Conquergood's theorisations about the praxis potentials of contemporary performance art, which I will expand on in my thesis.

because the (non)authorizing body is not perceived as the determining one of correct behaviour that we need solidarity across historically disadvantaged and unrecognized identities – those, in curator Nicholas Bourriaud's words, of "(the) women, the savage, the poor, and every nonstandard individual."[3]

Transgression can be perceived as a punitive tool, an appendage, to those in power, to legitimize their authority and, as well as a concept that has revolutionary potential that tests and challenges normative constructs of power and legitimacy. This is because, as Michel Foucault demonstrated in *Preface to Transgression* (1963), deriving his theory from the writings of the Marquis de Sade, Georges Bataille and Friedrich Nietzsche (who theorized transgression as primarily the violation or challenging of moral conventions and codes) the world is "exposed by the experience of its limits, made and unmade by that excess which transgresses it."[4] Transgression is a destructive as well as a productive force, one that delineates and constitutes at the same time. Afterall, "…a limit could not exist if it were absolutely uncrossable and reciprocally, transgression would be pointless if it merely crossed a limit composed of illusions and shadows."[5] To study what is deemed transgressive is therefore one method to understand a worldview, one that reveals its sore points in the reactions it shows to phenomena, such as the contemporary performances I address in this dissertation. The reactions they received from the audience and from critics is the reason I selected these artworks, which have received these reactions because they each are in their own way transgressing some boundary, such as those around identity, race, gender roles, sexuality, physical violence, self harm etc. which I categorized for the sake of coherence as cultural, physical, and sex/gender.[6]

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[3] Inclusions 10.

[4] Michel Foucault, Preface to Transgression, 32.

[5] Foucault, Preface, 34.

[6] Similar to Amelia Jones (who traces the terminology to queer/feminist/trans activist Vivian Namaste's theorisations), I use sex/gender and not sex and/or gender, to draw attention how the two are inextricably constitutive.

Performance art, in the cultural imaginary, is almost synonymous with transgression. Since its recognition in the 1960s as a separate art form, performance art has continuously challenged preconceived notions of cultural, physical, and sex/gender boundaries. When subject matter is too painful, such as the lives lost to systemic racism, gender-based violence, or neo-imperialism (amongst other things), transgression can be the only language remaining that can express and/or address the affect spilled out beyond the confines of "rational" response.[7] Transgressive performances have the capacity to counter the hegemonic neutralisation and silencing of outpourings of pain and anger. Due to the "shock effect" they create, these performances have the power to destabilize the mastery of the beholder of the gaze, which can subsequently lead to the interrogation of the centrality of hegemonic (white, ableist, hetero&cisnormative) subjectivity itself.[8]

Indeed, transgression, at its most acute, indexes the provocativeness of live art, as well as the transgression of boundaries between performativity and everyday acts, and the boundaries between the political and the aesthetic. The insights offered by the works I study subvert and even mock essentialist frameworks of sex/gender, race, ethnicity, and nationhood, and thereby demonstrate the porous conceptual boundaries in which transgression takes place.

The invitation of performance art might be to transgress cultural boundaries, as in the works of James Luna who offered the participants an opportunity to *Take a Picture With a Real Indian* (1992, 2001, 2010), or Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Coco Fusco who

[7] I consider Elaine Scarry's proposal that pain cannot be expressed through language in this regard.

[8] Zoya Kocur and Simon Leung, ed. Theory in Contemporary Art Since 1985 (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 200.

exhibited themselves in a golden cage (1992).[9] An audience might be prompted to transgress physical boundaries, to willingly enact harm upon artists such as Wafaa Bilal who extended his body to the whims of an international online audience in *Domestic Tension* and in *Iraqi or Dog?* (2008). Alternatively, they might be invited to witness the artists' self-injury, bringing into question the role and responsibilities of the global citizen in confrontation with the suffering of others as in the case of Mike Parr's and Carlos Martiel's performances. Contemporary performances can also transgress sexual boundaries, amplify, ridicule, reverse and/or obscure gender roles and decentralize normative narratives about sex and relationships through subversive actions, such as Lori Blondeau and Adrian Stimson's *Putting the Wild Back into the West* (date), Cassils's *Cuts* (2011), or Andrea Fraser's video project, *Untitled* (2003).

Here, I aim to interrogate the (pro)positions, perils and promises of contemporary performances that promote, embody, and/or enact transgressions of cultural, physical, and sex/gender boundaries. It seeks to examine the nature of the boundaries being crossed as well as the reasons why, aiming to shed light onto the artists' intentions, motivations, and formal choices, as well as the performances' affects and effects as documented in writing surrounding these works. A key underlying concern for my inquiry is the affective effect of witnessing and engaging in transgressive behaviour and violence on audience members and the effectiveness of transgressive performances as a pedagogical force that is attuned to social justice – often an underlying commitment of such works. I am also interested in examining how performances where the artists engage in or risk self-harm, be it physical or emotional, can assist an audience to self-reflexively engage with, challenge, resist, and denaturalize hegemonic worldviews.

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[9] Jillian Hernandez's *Aesthetics of Excess: The Art and Politics of Black and Latina Embodiment* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), where they examine the "miscegenated products of what happens when these appropriated innovators engage in the remix of crafting their own bodies and representations, which trouble, seduce, and sometimes capitulate with the desirous gaze" will be highly relevant to my investigation of these works.

That my study is informed predominantly by textual evidence and visual analysis and not the experience of the actual event is a challenge art historians and theorists of contemporary performance art continue to grapple with, particularly since performances have become increasingly mediated.[10] Here I agree with Amelia Jones, who asserts in "'Presence' in absentia: Experiencing Performances in Documentation," that although "the experience of viewing a photograph or reading a text is clearly different from sitting in a small room watching an artist perform, neither has a privileged relationship to the historical 'truth' of a performance."[11]

In what follows, I outline the three primary modes of transgression that I interrogate – cultural, physical, and sex/gender.

Cultural Transgressions

I propose to investigate the role of transgression in works by artists of colour (working in Canada and the US) concerned with cultural sovereignty and appropriation, through close readings and visual/performance analysis. Here I give an overview of the works I am considering, pulling out some of the concerns and thematics that I find most compelling. My investigation of performances that create space for audience members to experiment with *culturally* transgressive fantasies takes its cue from Dylan Robinson and Keren Zaiontz's critique of contemporary artist Sheila Hall's *To Connect* (2008), a public

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[10] Richard Schechner "Theater Criticism" 9, no.3 (Spring 1965); Herbert Blau, *Take Up the Bodies: Theater at the Vanishing Point* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1982); Peggy Phelan*, Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1993; Jose Esteban Munoz, "Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts," *Women and Performance: Journal of Feminist Theory* 8, no.2 (1996): 5-16; Amelia Jones, "'Presence' in Absentia: Experiencing Performance as Documentation," *Art Journal* 56, no.4 (December 1997), 11-18; Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1999); Rebecca Schneider, "Performance Remains," *Performance Research* 6, no.2 (2001); Diana Taylor, The archive and the repertoire : performing cultural memory in the Americas (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); Diana Taylor, *¡Presente! : the politics of presen*ce (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020).

[11] Amelia Jones, Presence in absentia, 11.

artwork where the words "to connect" are written across Vancouver's popular and touristic sites in twenty-two of the numerous languages spoken by the communities that inhabit the city. The authors describe the work as an affirmation of the "narratives of neoliberal multiculturalism in Canada" that have risen to popularity after the country adopted multiculturalism as a state policy in 1971. While the authors find merit in Hall's decision to inscribe the words in their original syllabics for its contribution to the creation of visual sovereignty, they are critical of the work for displaying the Indigenous languages spoken in the area alongside those of various settler groups without any distinction to indicate the former's primacy on the occupied land that is called Canada: "*To Connect* thus affirms that Vancouver is today a place of many cultures, of which First Peoples are to be recognized as one part. As such, the piece participates in a process of integration that abrogates First Peoples *sui generis* claims to this territory through the equalization of cultures."[12]

In comparison, Dylan Robinson points to the strategic use of language to represent, activate and enact Indigenous sovereignty in *Remarking/Reclaiming*, another public work created by the collective Ogimaa Mikana between 2013-2023. For this work the collective, which includes Anishinaabe artist Susan Blight and the Anishinaabe scholar Hayden King, renamed the street signs in Toronto with Indigenous place names, "re-covered" historical plaques with Indigenous histories, and occupied billboards with untranslated texts. The artists stated: "We are slowly reclaiming our territories from an alien landscape committed to erasing us while contributing to the growing Indigenous cultural, political, and linguistic revitalization efforts across Turtle Island. In the space

[12] Dylan Robinson and Keren Zaiontz "Public Art in Vancouver and the Civic Infrastructure of Redress," in *The Land We Are: Artists & Writers Unsettle the Politics of Reconciliation* edited by Gabrielle L'Hirondelle Hill and Sophie McCall (Winnipeg, ARP Books, 2015), 37.

between raiding up our nations and language and reminding non-Indigenous people that they are on Indian land, we hope to create dialogue."[13]

Exemplified by the billboard which depicts a wampum belt accompanied by the words "If you want to learn something, first you must learn this," in both Anishinaabe and English, Dylan Robinson suggests that "the sovereignty of Ogimaa Mikana's work takes place through a demand for the public to learn, rather than through an offer to teach."[14] Unlike Sheila Hall's *To Connect*, which in Robinson's reading contributes, despite itself, to the ongoing erasure of Indigenous cultures, Ogimaa Mikana's project signifies the urgent need for redress by reminding the audience that they are on unceded Indigenous land which entails certain expectations if not obligations.

A key text that has helped me understand the distinction between the works addressed by Robinson is "*Inuit Qaujimatuqangit:* The Role of Indigenous Knowledge in Supporting Wellness in Inuit Communities in Nunavut," by educational consultant Shirley Tagalik, which outlines two ongoing dangers that threaten the cultural sovereignty of Indigenous peoples. The first is the false equalization of Indigenous ways of living and being with that of a global or contemporary culture, thereby appropriating and diluting Indigenous values, principles and beliefs, which "enable(s) the proponents of a universal culture to maintain the status quo by indicating that they have accepted cultural beliefs and, in fact, share them within the existing way of working."[15] As the authors point out, "this practice raises challenges to cultural authenticity and is ultimately a mechanism of assimilation." The second threat identified in the article is the expectation that Indigenous peoples

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[13] Ogimaamikana, "For the Past 3-4 Years the Ogimaa Mikana Project...," Ogimaa Mikana: Reclaiming/ Renaming, March 10, 2016, https://ogimaamikana.tumblr.com/post/140825018906/for-the-past-3-4-years-the-ogimaa-mikana-project#:~:text=Ogimaa%20Mikana%3A%20Reclaiming%2FRenaming,-Contact&text=We%20are%20slowly%20reclaiming%20our,revitalization%20efforts%20across%20Turtle%20Island.

[14] Dylan Robinson, "Public Writing, Sovereign Reading: Indigenous Language Art in Public Space," *Art Journal* 76, no.2 (2017): 95.

[15] Shirley Tagalik, "Inuit *Qaujimatuqangit*: The Role of Indigenous Knowledge in Supporting Wellness in Inuit Communities in Nunavut," National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health (January 2012): 6.

cannot maintain their unique perspective and identity but must enter and exist in a "space between two cultures." Ogimaa Mikana's public works resist the threats outlined in the article by refusing translation which ultimately can lead to a disengaged and unimpactful consumption of the text. This is because, as David Garneau writes in *Modes of Engagement*, "the colonial attitude is characterized not only by scopophilia, a drive to look, but also an urge to penetrate, to traverse, to know, to translate, to own and to exploit. The attitude assumes that everything should be accessible to those with the means and will to access them; everything is ultimately comprehensible, a potential commodity, resource, or salvage."[16]

At first sight, David Garneau's warning appears to be in direct contrast with Guillermo Gómez-Peña's *Mexotica*, a three-day workshop/performance event put on by the Art Department of GC&SU whose program read:

> You may now experience anything you want, become whomever you wish, or purchase whichever cultural, sexual, spiritual, artistic or political experience you desire. You can impersonate other genders or ethnic identities without having to suffer any physical, social, or political repercussions, or be subjected to the rage of the excluded. You don't even need to belong to any 'real' community. And you can do all this from the solitude of your home or by visiting this gallery.[17]

La Pocha Nostra's invitation, however, in overtly inviting the reader/viewer to contribute to the erasure of cultural differences and distinctions necessary to maintain to protect the integrity of marginalized cultures and identities, offers a sardonic and pointed response to

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[16] David Garneau, "Imaginary Spaces of Conciliation and Reconciliation: Art, Curation and Healing," In *Acts of Engagement: Taking Aesthetic Action In and Beyond the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*, edited by Dylan Robinson and Keavy Martin (Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2016), 23.

[17] Guillermo Gómez Peña, *Ethno-techno: Writings on Performance, Activism, and Pedagogy* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 48.

the rise of multiculturalism as a global trend. As Gómez-Peña suggests in "In Defense of Performance Art," "[i]n performance, impersonating other cultures and problematizing the very process of impersonation can be an effective strategy."[18]

In his collection of pedagogical essays on performance art, Ethno-techno, Gómez-Peña observes that the end of the 20th century witnessed a backlash to humanitarian concerns and identity politics which worked in tandem with corporate multiculturalism. The practical consequence of this was to equalize and obliterate subjective realities. The "benevolent" yet apolitical multiculturalism adopted by corporations and media outlets in North America in the 1980s and 1990s ensure that issues such as race, gender, and matters of cultural diversity were no longer addressed as systemic issues requiring collective response. Instead, it was the individual's personal responsibility to overcome the restrictions set by these socioeconomic realities. Further, "(t)his global transculture artificially softened the otherwise sharp edges of cultural difference, fetishizing them in such a way as to render them desirable." [19]Pena's artistic response takes the form of "epic performances mimicking its very practices of representation."[20] He and his colleagues create what the artist calls "total environments," dioramas and prosceniums, where "marginalized" artists enact "the stylized desires and intercultural fetishes of the mainstream" and provide their audience space to do so themselves.[21]

In this context, and inspired by Bourriaud's theories on relational aesthetics, in 1997, Gómez-Peña, Roberto Sifuentes and Sara Shelton Mann from the dance troupe

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[18] Guillermo Gómez Peña, *Unplugged: Texts on Live Art, Social Practice and Imaginary Activism (2008-2019)* (New York: Routledge, 2021), 22.

[19] Gómez-Peña, *Ethno-techno*, 49.

[20] Gómez-Peña, *Ethno-techno*, 50.

[21] Gómez-Peña, *Ethno-techno*, 50.

Contraband started a 3-year interactive performance series titled El Mexterminator.[22] On one level, the work is a sociological study of the North American attitudes and stereotypes about Anglo-Latin relations. Using the internet as an instrument to practice "reverse anthropology" as Gómez-Peña calls it, they developed 'confessional' websites where they asked the public to contribute how they thought the artists should dress as Chicanos and Mexicans, and the types of social rituals and performance actions they should engage in. From this data, which Pena describes as "explicit," they derived innumerable performances and performance personas.[23] Pena commented that such performances "look and felt like fun, but it was a painful time and a painful series of performances attempting to articulate it."[24]

It is not that he was not prepared for the emotional turmoil. In *Guatinaui World Tour*, also known as *The Couple in the Cage*, Guillermo Gómez-Peña and fellow artist Coco Fusco locked themselves in a golden cage that visually evoked the myth of the "noble savage," and toured major Western art institutions (primarily anthropological and ethnographic museums) beginning in 1992, during the quincentenary celebration of Columbus's genocidal invasions. The couple, supposedly from a recently discovered land in the Gulf of Mexico appeared in public three days at a time, enacting "the exotic, primitive Other" by speaking a nonsensical language and performing for the audience members in their "native" regalia. The ruse was emboldened by the contributions of the "security guards" -- performers who were in on the plot -- who informed the audience about these newly discovered people's "primitive" ways of life while walking Fusco and Gómez-Peña on leashes during their bathroom breaks. The artists engaged in a number of participatory interactions with the audience, including offering to have photos taken with the audience

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[22] Guillermo Gómez Peña, *Conversations Across Borders: A Performance Artist Converses with Theorists, Curators, Activists and Fellow Artists* (London: Seagull Books, 2011), 336.

[23] Gómez-Peña, *Conversations Across Borders*, 336.

[24] Gómez-Peña, *Ethno-techno*, 50.

for a small fee. For an additional fee, Fusco would dance to a rap song and Gómez-Peña would show his genitals (which, in ways that I will return to in the section on sex/gender transgression, were "tucked" so as to further feminize the Indigenous Other). These – and other – acts drew attention to some of the key problematics of the performance, problematics that are key: the question of cultural hybridity and the dehumanizing effect of the performance on the individuals displayed *and* on those who witness the display.

To the artists' surprise, the performance, which was meant to provide "a satirical commentary on Western concepts of the exotic, primitive Other," turned into a spectacle of that which it parodied as the viewers believed that Fusco and Gómez-Peña *were* in fact recently discovered peoples.[25] Coco Fusco's detailed account of her experience relayed in "The Other History of Intercultural Performance" and the short film *Couple In the Cage,* produced by Fusco and Paulo Heredia, illuminate a wide range of responses from the witnesses of the performance. While there were some members of the general public who found the exhibit inhumane and contacted the hosting institutions to complain, there were many others who played along, feeding the artists bananas, taking pictures with them, and making racist comments that they did not realize the artists could understand. In one instance some teenagers attempted to burn Gómez-Peña with cigarettes and handed him a beer bottle full of urine.[26] The performance revealed important insights into the spectators' gullibility when dealing with institutions, ignorance about world history, and implicit and explicit racism – insights that are still relevant today.[27] It also highlighted the promises and limits of these participatory forms of performance art in terms of the social

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[25] Coco Fusco, "The Other History of Intercultural Performance," *TDR* 38, no.1 (1994): 143. It is important to note that the viewers' capacity to verify the truthfulness of the exhibit was relatively limited due to lack of immediate access to informative media such as the internet.

[26] Anna Johnson, Coco Fusco, Guillermo Gómez-Peña, "Interview: Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña by Anna Johnson," BOMB Magazine (Winter 1993), accessed 24 May 2024, https://bombmagazine.org/articles/1993/01/01/coco-fusco-and-guillermo-g%C3%B3mez-pe%C3%B1a/.

[27] The audience's reactions have been accounted in Coco Fusco's essay titled "The Other History of Intercultural Performance" as well as the film *The Couple in the Cage: Guatinaui Odyssey* (1992), directed by Fusco and Paula Heredia.

contract (for those in the know) regarding buying into or challenging the stated parameters of the performance by acquiescing to or rejecting them. Given the number of people who genuinely believed that human beings were being exhibited in a cage (in 1992, in Western countries), it also demonstrated the magnitude of the power we appoint to institutions and lack of knowledge about institutional practices and human rights. Given the atrocities humanity witnesses and/or experiences daily, the audience's credulousness is perhaps not so surprising. It is however important to note that the credulity was afforded to those who instilled the institutional frame with authority, from a relatively comfortable and disengaged positionality.[28] By situating the artists as "the Other", Gómez-Peña and Fusco's performance amplified the positionality of the witnesses as the norm, bringing into question the very dialectic that has enabled and encouraged similar exhibits to happen since the era of colonial expansions.[29]

Another well-historicized Indigenous response to the colonial practice of human display is James Luna's *Artifact Piece.* In 1987, he laid himself in a display case in the Museum of Man, the same museum where his great-grandmother Maria Soledad Apish Trujillo's photograph, taken by ethnographer Constance DuBois, belonging not to the artist but the institution, was displayed.[30] Luna's body was covered only with a breechcloth, and classificatory labels placed around him indicated sites of injury and scars, revealing that they were received as a result of the artist's alcohol induced escapades. In separate surrounding cases were ceremonial items as well as the artist's personal belongings

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[28] There were also some empathic responses to the inhumane practice of exhibiting human beings, mostly from Indigenous and PoC commentators.

[29] An extended and detailed history of colonial display in world fairs and touring exhibitions is outlined in art historian Jane Chin Davidson's essay "Deterritorializing Bodies: Body Art and the Colonial World Expositions," published in *Dead History, Live Art?* edited by Jonathan Harris (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007).

[30] Jane Blocker, "Ambivalent Entertainments: James Luna, Performance, and the Archive," Grey Room 37 (October 209): 55.

including 60s albums, divorce papers served to him during the performance, photographs, and his college degree.[31]

According to art historian Jane Chin Davidson, Luna's *Artifact Piece* was a "derisive reconstruction of the colonial display (which) contained all of the visual and discursive elements that were used to constitute the Other, the scientific catalogue of indexical scars, documentation of alcoholism as proof of aberrant behaviour, props that support tribal authenticity and, most importantly, the corporeal native as object."[32] One racist attribute still too often associated with Native American peoples is the "drunken Indian" stereotype, which also has roots in the so-called scientific studies of the same era.[33] Luna's performance strategy, in *Artifact Piece*, is to intervene into this stereotype by amplifying it, provoking the audience to contemplate the assumptions that they might readily have due to racist media practices. As the artist expressed, his mission was "to conceptualize and formulate ways that would visually confront and shift people's perceptions of 'Indian' in order to free myself and Native people from the confines of the imagined: from expectations that lock us in history and deny us a voice and place in contemporary culture."[34] By offering Luna's alive and present body amidst other objects of display in the museum which narrates the story of a colonized people through an

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[31] Jane Chin Davidson, "Deterritorializing Bodies: Body Art and the Colonial World Expositions," in *Dead History, Live Art?: Spectacle, Subjectivity and Subversion in Visual Culture since the 1960s*, Jonathan Harris, eds. (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007), 177.

[32] Chin Davidson, "Deterritorializing," 177. In her essay "Deterritorializing bodies: Body art and the colonial World expositions," Davidson identifies constituting the Other as a colonial project that has relied on the practice of exhibiting human beings in fitting with the Western imagination. The effort to distinguish the West and the Western from "the rest" became an organized and well-established effort in the nineteenth century which witnessed the proliferation of human showcases in midways and world expositions. Far from factual, "(i)n this period, the new identification of the cultural Other through visual depiction was never more than a tendentious representation of the superiority of the Western imperial subject" (167-168).

[33] Marie Wadden, "The 'drunken Indian' Stereotype and Social Healing | CBC News," CBCnews, October 22, 2008, https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/the-drunken-indian-stereotype-and-social-healing-1.729514.

[34] James Luna and Renee Sueppel, "Notes on the Process of Performance," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 39, no.4 (2015): 46.

institutional lens, *Artifact Piece* asserts Indigenous culture[35] as something present and alive, rather than of the past or dead, thereby challenging the dominant narrative of such institutions that Indigenous cultures are a thing of the past, an ideal that can be nostalgically reminisced (within limits) but no longer robust or relevant.

In *Take a Photo with a Real Indian*, performed in 1992, 2001 and 2010, Luna again mobilized the performance strategy of intervention-through-amplification to address the white fantasy of the vanishing race. The audience was given the opportunity to have their photographs taken with the artist dressed in either contemporary khakis and a polo shirt, war dance regalia, or a loincloth, which were exemplified by three life-size cut-outs that accompanied the artist. Unsurprisingly, in all three iterations of the performance, few viewers opted for the first option, demonstrating the predominant contemporary perception of the modern Indigenous person as less interesting than the romanticized one.[36] As Elizabeth S. Hawley suggests, "*Take a Picture* is particularly pointed in its interrogation of the pose and the photograph, and how both Native and non-Native peoples are implicated in and affected by the resulting stereotypes: Native peoples are expected to adhere to the stereotypic construction of Indian identity, but in performing this role, they reify the stereotype. At the same time, non-Native peoples perpetuate the problematic cycle by only characterizing as "Indian" those Native peoples that adhere to the stereotype that non-Native peoples have constructed and come to expect."[37] Accordingly, Luna has described the performance as humiliating both for himself and for

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[35] It must be recognized that each Indigenous culture has their practices and norms, and the construction of a pan-Indigenous culture is itself a colonial concept which Luna is intervening into, which generated the imaginary of "the Indian."

[36] Elizabeth S. Hawley, "James Luna and the Paradoxically Present Vanishing Indian," *Contemporaneity: Historical Presence in Visual Culture* 5, no. 1 (2016): 7.

[37] Elizabeth S. Hawley, "James Luna and the Paradoxically Present Vanishing Indian," *Contemporaneity: Historical Presence in Visual Culture* 5, no. 1 (2016): 7.

the audience, and in one iteration, could only "calm or numb the crowds by saying, 'OK, next you can take your picture with a real nigger."[38]

The works discussed here, as shown in the examples given above, highlight performance strategies that draw equivalences between different cultural expressions, amplify stereotypes, and promote cultural appropriation practices that enable Anglocentric and racist imaginations to find physical form. Given that these issues are pervasive in contemporary society it may seem counterintuitive that the artists would *augment* imagery that could be detrimental to social justice efforts. Arguably, what distinguishes the enactments of audience members from banal racism is the delineated construct of the performance space in which participants can both experience *catharsis* and self-reflect on their own positionality within the performance and in the outside world.[39] This is the space in which participants can experience and experiment with their fantasies, and heal them, through dis/identification with the Other, at times even at the expense of the artist.

The works described in this section highlight stereotypical representations of the Other rooted in racist history, creating space for the audience and the artists to experience their and each others' colonial modern positionality within the parameters of the performances. This experience has the capacity to generate questions about one's relational allegiances to various identities and their attitudes about the Other(s), potentially resulting in a renewed understanding of the Self in relation to the Other, which, as de Oliveira points

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[38] Andrea Liss and Roberto Bedoya, *James Luna Actions & Reactions: An eleven Year Survey of Installation/Performance Work 1981-1992* (California: University of California Press, 1992), 13. I purposefully did not omit this word despite its use being not in the realm of my subjectivity because it delivers the artist's important message to my audience.

[39] *Catharsis* is a term offered by Aristotle in *Poetics* to describe the process where a theatrical performance functions as a pressure relief valve to mitigate repressed feelings that are readily available in an audience's psyche which without an intervention or an outlet could fester and lead to the demise of society. In this sense, it is closely related to Chantal Mouffe's theorisations on necessary spaces of dissensus, created via art, which I have addressed in my historiography.

out in *Hospicing Modernity*, is imperative for humanity to partake and thrive in a sustainable and just future.[40]

Physical Transgressions

It is now necessary to extend from the question of cultural transgression linked to the performance and negotiation of identity to the violences that too often follow the racial and cultural hierarchies of settler-colonial power –those that impact the border of the physical body as proxy for the body of the nation state. One example of this is Wafaa Bilal's performances, that prompt their audience to engage in behaviour that elsewhere would be punishable by law. Bilal is a professor and contemporary artist who will go to extreme lengths to engage his audience in facing the atrocities of war and ongoing global conflict. He spent his childhood and young adulthood in Iraq under the rule of Saddam Hussein, witnessed two wars and an uprising, spent time in refugee camps in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia[41] and left to pursue his life in the U.S. as an asylum seeker. In 2004, Bilal's brother Haji was murdered in an American drone attack in Iraq, which compelled the artist "to use his art to confront those in the comfort zone with the realities of life in a conflict zone."[42] Bilal's primary concern for his projects from this time onwards has been to build a physical and virtual platform, using the internet, upon which people can engage

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[40] In *Hospicing Modernity*, educator Vanessa Machado de Oliveira describes modernity as the (false) understanding of land as an unalive, exploitable property, separate from the relations and entities that inhabit it, including humanity itself. De Oliveira suggests that the social constructs that humans attach themselves to, of community, nation, religion and other identities, jeopardize the collective future of human and non-human generations by promoting an idea of hierarchical stratification between all that coexists on the world, with humanity landing on top. This requires the *hospicing* of modernity, which as the material, non-humane conditions of the late capitalist system demonstrates, is, according to de Oliveira, at its demise, thereby grieving, reckoning with, and celebrating the loss of a worldview that positions humans (but only the select white cishet wealthy able-bodied male privileged) at the top of the proverbial food chain, granting him allowance to exploit and abuse the rest. Importantly, hospicing modernity requires one to come to terms with modernity's accomplishments as well as failures; accept, acknowledge, and redress humanity's wrongs, against itself and against the world, throughout history and today. Vanessa Machado de Oliveira, *Hospicing Modernity: Facing Humanity's Wrongs and the Implications for Social Activism* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2021).

[41] Bilal had to flee Iraq where he was studying geography and geology at the University of Baghdad, after attending a protest against Saddam's invasion of Kuwait.

[42] 1. "Shoot an Iraqi," Wafaa Bilal, accessed May 24, 2024, https://wafaabilal.com/shoot-an-iraqi/.

with the artwork, and each other.[43] Bilal's performative works, where he utilizes his body and inflicts pain upon it to address visibility, alienation, and apathy, bring into question the limits of individual and collective ethics and responsibility both in response to the artwork and more broadly. In 2007, in the midst of the so-called War on Terror, after listening to a U.S. soldier who directed drone planes express that she does not regret murdering Iraqi individuals, Bilal decided to build an art project that engaged the viewers through media and the internet and confronted them with their disconnectedness.[44] In doing so, he also revealed the racism and brutality as well as the solidarity and compassion of participants of the project.

For *Shoot an Iraqi/Domestic Tension*, a live art installation, Bilal incarcerated himself in a gallery that was transformed into a living space for thirty days. He constructed a robotic paintball gun with a webcam attached on top that could be controlled by the participants of the project online, through a website that relayed live feed images of the gallery. The performance could be experienced two ways. Visitors could walk around the space in Flatfile Galleries, watching the artist dodge paintballs. They could also command the paintball gun to be fired. Alternatively, participants could watch the live feed images of the gallery on the website. "Once logged into the site, spectators could participate in the work by manoeuvring and/or firing the gun in the gallery and/or communicating with the artist and other participants of the work through online instant messaging." [45] By the end of the performance, the artist had been shot over 60,000 times by participants from over 130 countries.

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[43] Anjali Kamat and Wafaa Bilal, "Interview with Iraqi Artist Wafaa Bilal," *The Arab Studies Journal* 18, no.1 (Spring 2010): 328.

[44] "Wafaa Bilal discusses Shoot an Iraqi," Youtube video, 2:21, May 24, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DcyquvDEe0o

[45] Lara Stevens, "Alienation in the Information Age: Wafaa Bilal's Domestic Tension," *Australasian Drama Studies* (2014): 79.

On the website, which resembled the confessional sites built for *Mexterminator* in their anonymity, the audience could communicate with the artist and each other through online instant messaging, which culminated in over 3000 pages of interactions by the end of the period. Heated arguments about racism, terrorism, torture, and human rights were commonplace in the international chat room. Bilal describes this as the most rewarding aspect of the work, as it made him realize his role as the initiator of a platform upon which people could engage in critical discussions and interventions.[46]And the participants *did* intervene. Some unleashed their racism and violence in verbal as well as physical form. A hacker programmed the paintball gun to shoot the artist continuously, which was then countered by an activist resistance movement called the "Virtual Human Shield," organized to protect Bilal 24/7, through collective human labour, by continuously pressing the command keys to point the gun away from him.[47] Even though Bilal suffered physical harm and PTSD as a result of the month-long performance, the artist states that the project gave him hope in humanity and inspired him to believe in the potential of artistic interventions that offer a platform where difficult conversations can be had.[48]

Bilal again put his body on the line in 2008, in *Iraqi or Dog?*[49] for which he organized "a democratic election" where voters could decide whether to torture a rescue dog, made to look charming in photos, or the artist, who was reduced to the descriptive "an Iraqi," by waterboarding them. This was done in protest of U.S. vice president Dick Cheney and the Attorney General's proposition which was supported by the newly appointed Federal Judge that waterboarding is not torture. When the results showed that he was elected the artist submitted to being tortured, with his face tightly wrapped in a white cloth and body

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[46] "Wafaa Bilal discusses Shoot an Iraqi," Youtube video, 2:21, May 24, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DcyquvDEe0o.

[47] Lara Stevens, "Alienation," 91-92.

[48] Hany Ali Mahmoud Abdelfattah, "Performing Abjection in Wafaa Bilal's Domestic Tension," *3L: Language, Linguistics, Literature* 27, no.1 (2021): 24.

[49] https://web.archive.org/web/20080724160029/http:/www.dogoriraqi.com/pressrelease.html

tied, by a man wearing a Santa costume representing "the West," in a private, recorded, and hard-to-watch performance/protest that can be accessed online.[50] Wafaa Bilal's performances ask their audience to travel the line between cruelty and compassion, between brutality and responsibility, which is analogous to the ethical dilemmas that the global citizen, as the observer and potentially, perpetrator of atrocities, encounter daily. By positioning the artist as the subject of the audience's free will, they empower and embolden individuals with critical responsibility that has repercussions and implications beyond the space of the performance.

...and Counting (2010) is an extension of these projects where "the objective is to establish a virtual platform to engage people in a political dialogue in which they may have otherwise been unable or unwilling to engage."[51] The body and aesthetic pain play an essential role in Bilal's work, which invokes the Shi'i practice of commemorating the death of the Imams "by inflicting pain on the body, not necessarily out of guilt but out of respect for the tradition's heroes."[52] To raise awareness about the murder of Iraqi civilians invisibilized by the media, Bilal had tattooed the names of Iraqi cities, in Arabic, on a borderless map on his back. Then, over the duration of the 24 hours during which the gallery was open to visitors, one hundred thousand dots in invisible ink, to represent the Iraqis who were murdered in the war were subsequently tattooed onto his back. He then had added five thousand dots to represent the dead American soldiers in red ink, which visually invoked both the carnage of war and the comparative hypervisibility of Western deaths in the media. Throughout the performance, visitors of the gallery were invited to read the names of the dead out loud. The performance was streamed live on the internet.

Bilal's notion of the skin as a canvas, a surface on which to communicate important messages, is also resonant in Mike Parr's performance work, *Close The Concentration*

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[50] "Dog or Iraqi," Youtube video, 1:38, May 24, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9XVgfJVs0nw

[51] Anjali Kamat and Wafaa Bilal, "Interview," 316.

[52] Anjali Kamat and Wafaa Bilal, "Interview," 319.

Camps, which is a response to the imprisonment of refugees from the Middle East and Southeast Asia who attempted to arrive in Australia via a tanker ship, in the detention centres located on offshore islands, including Manus and Nauru in Papua New Guinea. Performed in 2002, *Close the Concentration Camps* was conceived in solidarity with over fifty refugees who sewed their lips together in protest against their invisibility, imprisonment and silencing.[53] For this six-hour long performance, which touches on cultural transgression through analogy, Mike Parr sat motionless on a hardback chair positioned in the middle of the gallery, facing away from the audience towards a mirrored wall. He was dressed in a white shirt and an old 1940s suit, an attire that resembled that of the Jews who endured the Concentration Camps in Nazi Germany and Eastern Europe. Accompanying him, tending to his wounds intermittently, was the nurse who had stitched the artist's face together, leaving it contorted and bloody. As theater lecturer Sarah Austin recalls, the room smelled of antiseptic and singed flesh from the branding of Parr's leg with the word 'ALIEN' prior to the entry of the audience-witnesses.[54]

"Alien" is a loaded word pejoratively used to describe outsiders, outcasts, foreigners, strangers, divergent individuals from a culture of a group, with which Mike Parr, who was born with a malformed arm and darker skin in the 1940s, in a racist country that continues to discriminate against people of color, identifies. It is a non-specified categorical word for the Other that enables Parr to perform the suffering of those who do not share his privilege as a white heterosexual man born in Australia. Given the broad scope of the word, the personal act of branding serves to identify Parr as an individual outsider without coopting the real experiences of the people whose suffering he is drawing attention to.

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[53]Sarah Austin, "Mike Parr and the discursive rupture: The condemned and punished body as a political strategy in Close the Concentration Camps," *Double Dialogues* (2005): 6.

[54] Austin, "Mike Parr," 4.

Mike Parr's performance has been the target of scrutiny from (ironically, mostly conservative) critics who deemed the performance to be a dramatized parody of the real plight of refugees.[55] Given the dangers of equalizing cultures, it is important to highlight the ways that performance art that seems to be equating the suffering of peoples with different identities can lead to an erasure of nuances, and that this has critical implications for the work itself. It is also important, however, not to conflate performance with representation, thereby collapsing the space between representation and event, presenting, and perceiving them as indistinguishable, as Parveen Adams and Mark Cousins warn us in "The Truth on Assault."[56] Guillermo Gómez-Peña's elaboration on the difference between performance and representation in "In Defence of Performance Art" further explains why reducing Parr's work to mere representation would be mistaken: "On stage, performance artists rarely 'represent' others. Rather we allow our multiplicity of selves and voices to unfold and enact their frictions and contradictions in front of an audience."[57] It is because the self that is performed is already available in Parr's psyche, who in 1973 similarly had the word "ARTIST" branded for his performance, *Rules & Displacement Activities Part I*, that *Close the Concentration Camps* succeeds as a social commentary drawing attention to the shared atrocities in distinct contexts.

The title of the work, projected onto the gallery wall, and the word branded on Mike Parr's leg are the only linguistic components of the silent performance where the artist refuses any communication by facing away from the audience, denying them eye contact that could bring any resolution to either party's discomfort in confrontation with the experience of suffering. This deliberate decision, and the eerie, prolonged silence that

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[55] Austin, "Mike Parr," 2.

[56] In their response to radical feminist Catherine MacKinnon's proposal that there is no difference between watching pornography and rape, Adams and Cousins assert that MacKinnon's suggestion eradicates the symbolic order that is necessary to maintain different registers between fantasy, representation and reality. Parveen Adams and Mark Cousins, "The Truth On Assault," *October* 71 (1995).

[57] Guillermo Gómez-Peña, "In Defense of Performance Art," https://www.pochanostra.com/antes/jazz_pocha2/mainpages/in_defense.htm, accessed 24 May 2024.

fills the gallery attests to Elaine Scarry's position who in *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World,* declares: "Whatever pain achieves, it achieves in part through its unsharability, and it ensures this unsharability through its resistance to language." She further argues that "physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it," observing that "when events are truly unspeakable, speaking might not be the preferred way to process them."[58]

A similar performance by Parr that speaks to the brutality of war and imperialism, and the puerility of patriotism is *Aussie, Aussie, Aussie, oi, oi, oi*[59] (May 2003) for which the artist had his face sewn together "in protest at the Australian Government's participation in the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the blinkered coverage by right wing-press in Australia."[60] For this live-streamed endurance performance Parr sat, unmoving, for thirty hours on a chair in Artspace in Sydney, with the Australian flag uncomfortably tucked under his malformed arm. Behind him, on the gallery wall were printed his event-scores alongside news headlines that related to the invasion of Iraq, and Australian nationalism. Given the predominantly right-wing tendency in mass media in Australia which reached a crescendo in the early to mid-2000s, Parr's performance was timely, and like Bilal's *Domestic Tension*, it was self-sacrificial; during the final six hours of the performance, the online audience were given the option to electroshock the artist by the click of a button.[61]

In 2005, for *Kingdom Come and/or Punch Holes in the Body Politic*, Parr again let his audience determine how much pain he would have to endure while he sat at the same

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[58] Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 4.

[59] "A patriotic catch-cry commonly chanted by crowds at sporting events in Australia." The resulting video works of this performance are titled *Democratic torture* and *Un-Australian*. https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/212.2019/#about

[60] https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/212.2019/#about

[61] https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/212.2019/#about

gallery, with sensors placed in the front and sides of the space around him that delivered an electric current to the artist whenever someone crossed their path. Cameras aimed at the artist's face relayed his pain and anger every time he received a shock, to the wall of the adjacent gallery. Parr's clothes, as well as the chair he sat on was bright orange, evoking the image of the prisoners at Guantanamo Bay whose torture by the U.S. government in the name of counterterrorism had been recently revealed. Given that the audience members were not made aware prior to their participation in the performance about the presence of the sensors, *Kingdom Come* diverged from his 2003 work in the ethical conundrums that it posed. The ethics and efficacy of Parr's strategy to coerce the audience to unwittingly partake in the artist's torture is an important consideration that I seek to tackle in comparison with the works I have explored where the witnesses have the option to not participate.

As art critic Edward Scheer notes, *Kingdom Come* incorporated components such as "the violent address to the body of the artist, the ethical challenge to the audience, the extensive use of audio-visual media, and the work's unfolding in time," that are emblematic of Parr's work post-2001, characterized by their explicitly political agenda.[62] Some other examples are his performance from 2018 when the artist spent three days entombed beneath a busy street in Tasmania with water but no food, to protest the purposeful obliteration of the atrocities committed against Indigenous people in Tasmania.[63] Mike Parr's performances are informed by the sociopolitical injustices prevalent during their genesis and they intervene in the status quo by bringing activist attention to the subjects. They offer a unique study on the overlaps between activism and

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[62] Edward Scheer, "Australia's Post-Olympic Apocalypse?" PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art 30, iss.1 (2008): 42.

[63] Next year, in grievance and lamentation of the deforestation of the Amazon, he closed his eyes for seven hours and painted black squares that symbolized the devastated forest on the walls of Carriageworks in Sydney. Parr continues this series of work where he performs with his eyes closed. Recently, in 2023, he created a four-and-a-half-hour performance against the ongoing genocide of Palestinians by the Israeli government where he wrote related words such as "Israel," "Palestine," and "apartheid," in black on Flinders Lane Gallery's white wall, only to cover them up with crimson paint, evoking the bloodshed. By the time he finished the performance and exited the room Parr was weeping.

performance art, imbricating the two together, while staying true to the central maxim of performance art offered by Diana Taylor, that its norm is to break norms.[64]

Carlos Martiel is an Afro-Cuban artist who also has an ouvre-long commitment to risking his well-being to bring attention to social and political injustice, specifically, racism, immigration and the abuse of power by government institutions across the world. After attending Catedra Arte de Conducta in Cuba, an art school founded by artist Tania Bruguera whose mission is to engage with politically and ethically responsible art making, Martiel immigrated to the U.S. by travelling through South America across the borders without valid clearances. Martiel's visceral performances, which often involve the artist's self-injury, explore "the politics and aesthetics of race, the desire for a flight from an insular Cuba, and the condition of the migrant in the contemporary global landscape."[65] Martiel tactically utilizes abjection and self-harm, a practice that, as I expanded on in the syllabus submitted as part of this candidacy package, has a long lineage in performance art, to provide commentary on the state of affairs in his home country where artists, as subjects of a authoritarian regime, are expected to "show willingness to participate in its economic, educational and militaristic agendas through demonstrations of revolutionary sacrifice as well as through performances of allegiance."[66]

An early performance, *Integracion (Outreach)* (2009), which was presented at the 10th Havana Biennal, saw the artist, dressed all in white, crawling and licking the floor of the gallery with his eyes covered in excrement. Martiel stated that the performance explored the idea of integration in the global era and specifically in Cuba, where racism is a

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[64] Diana Taylor, *Performance*, trans. Abigail Levine (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016),71.

[65] Jill Lane, "Political Stigmata: Arrest and Expenditure in the Art of Carlos Martiel," Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics, https://multimedio.hemi.press/carlos-martiel/political-stigmata-arrest-and-expenditure-in-the-art-of-carlos-martiel/, accessed 25 May 2025.

[66]Coco Fusco, *Dangerous Moves: Performance and Politics in Cuba* (London: Tate Publishing, 2015), 75, 119.

prevalent issue that is often left unaddressed. As typical of his performances, the work also referenced the history of slavery, where those enslaved were forced to clean up after the ruling class.

Martiel's performances are site-specific and research-driven, exemplified by *Expulsion* for which Martiel cut out the twelve stars off the EU flag and had them sewn onto his torso and arms, forming a perfect circle, as he stood still, without wincing, staring directly at his audience. After a while, the piercing artist Jeannine cut out the stars from his body, letting them fall on the floor one by one, surrounding him, after which the artist left the performance space.[67] *Expulsion* was presented at the 5th Thessaloniki Biennale of Contemporary Art curated by Eirini Papakonstantinou in 2015, the same year the Greek government held a referendum to decide whether it would accept the third bailout from the European Union. This was also when the immigration "crisis" was at its peak in Greece, which resulted in a loss of public support for the EU.[68] Martiel's performance brought into question the price of being "European," a "prize" for which countless refugees have lost their lives.

In *Plague* (2016), performed in Italy, another Mediterranean country that was heavily impacted by the influx of refugees, Martiel reflected on "the neo-Nazi and xenophobic practices which are increasing in European countries as consequence of the economic crisis and racist policies generated by the right-wing parties against immigrants and non-white minorities" by having his body fumigated with insecticide for cockroaches.[69] The performance took place in a gallery, the white pristineness of which visually and

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[67] Another site-specific work is Fosa (Pit), realized at The Hemispheric Institute's 10th meeting entitled Ex-céntrico in 2016 at Chile, where under the dictatorship of Pinochet twenty-six dissident men from Calama (among many others) were tortured and murdered. The performance is inspired by the dedication of Calama women to social justice and human rights, who continued their search for loved ones in the Atacama Desert tirelessly since 1973. It begins with Martiel buried under a bulk of sand. Throughout the performance ten Chilean women unearth Martiel's body by carrying handfuls of sand away from the site.

[68] Nikolas Koulouglou and George N. Georgarakis. "Public Support for European Integration in Greece and Italy Between 2015 and 2020." *Politics and Governance* 11, iss.3 (2023): 29.

[69] http://www.carlosmartiel.net/plague/

conceptually contrasted with his naked, marginalized body lying in abject pain on the floor.

Martiel has identified performance as the singular medium he can work with to "exorcise" himself from the internalized prejudices of others, for which nudity plays an important role.[70] The artist has stated:

> The naked has always been and will be a liberation for me. To undress is to remove filters, hierarchies of power, prejudices in relation to one's own body and that of *others*. In an initial moment was the way I had to accept my body in a society that has stigmatized the Afro-descendant. Contradictorily it is also vulnerability, but sometimes one has to accept its fragility. It is part of the human condition.

Endurance, duration and stillness are critical concepts in Martiel's works, as they leave the audience to contemplate on the reasoning behind the artist's performance decisions. In his 2018 series titled *Intruder*, executed in New York and in Frankfurt, Martiel remained standing barefoot on a flat sculpture shaped like the U.S., made with anti-climb security fence spikes that dug into his skin over the duration of the performance, to comment on the election of Donald Trump and the rise of the alt-right. Another sculpture was made from anti-houseless spikes in the shape of Europe, to intervene in inhumane policies implemented to further torture marginalized people for which Martiel's body was a stand-in.

For *Ascension* (2015), Martiel, whose father was in the armed forces and the national police, had pieces of a U.S. military uniform stitched onto his skin to bring attention to state violence and its impact on people of colour. For the duration of five hours, he again stood still, naked, looking at his audience as Samantha Putorte attached the pockets, epaulettes, and other fragments onto his body. His expressionless face and defiant gaze

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[70]Fernando Pichardo, "A means to decolonize the thought and denounce the contradictions of our time," May 29, 2017, http://steveturner.la/17293/news/carlos-martiel-5, accessed 25 May 2024.

contrasted with the violent act of piercing and the uniform cut into bits. Similarly in *Prodigal Son* performed in 2010, the year that Fidel Castro relinquished his presidential chair, Martiel critiqued mandated patriotism by pinning his father's military medals onto his chest.[71] As Fusco observes, "(i)n doing so, Martiel…transformed a political honour into an infliction, likening state power over revolutionary subjects to the marking of slave bodies as property."[72]

Although in most of Martiel's performances the audience's participation is "passive and oriented towards contemplation," he has created important works where intervention from witnesses play a critical role. [73] *Interseccion (Intersection)* (2016), where the artist settled in a punching bag that hung from the ceiling of a gallery as he allowed his audience to do whatever they want with his concealed body[74], and *Cuerpo (Body)* (2022) where he hung himself with a noose around his neck until various individuals from the audience[75] took turns holding him up to avoid his asphyxiation are some examples of such work.

Posesion (Possession) (2023) is another where the audience's participation is essential for the realization of the performance. For this work the artist transformed a table into a pillory, only in vertical direction, so that he used his body as a pillar alongside the four legs that enable a table to stand. His head and his hands sticking out on the table were

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[71] Jill Lane, "Political Stigmata," https://multimedio.hemi.press/carlos-martiel/political-stigmata-arrest-and-expenditure-in-the-art-of-carlos-martiel/, accessed 25 May 2025.

[72] Fusco, *Dangerous Moves*, 119.

[73] Tyler Akers and Carlos Martiel, "Carlos Martiel," *GAYLETTER* iss. 14, https://gayletter.com/carlos-martiel/?fbclid=IwAR1SOV3q5vs5er8QJOhPtlvVhu1cRF-UFNureHb8kPLapq5qZalAtn2gHEM, accessed 25 May 2024.

[74] By appointing complete agency over his body to the participants Martiel's performance evoked Marina Abramovic's *Rhythm 0*.

[75]I am not certain that these individuals were merely audience members and not assigned for the task.

covered with a silk tablecloth as Axé meals[76] were placed on the table, prepared and served by an Afro-Brazilian Bahian, to the visitors of the gallery. "*Possession* (spoke) of the black body that remains captive and possessed by the classist and racist system, which imitates the same perverse praxis used during the Conquest."[77]

Martiel's participatory performance, which embodies pain and punishment, could be construed as an antithesis to Rirkrit Tiravanija's *Untitled (Free*) (1995) in terms of its affect and effect on the audience. In light of the theories of art critics Nicolas Bourriaud, who champions Tiravanija's work for promoting convivial relationships which he deems to be an essential component of relational art, and Claire Bishop, who argues for the need for antagonism instead, I investigate the potentials and limitations of Bilal's, Parr's and Martiel's performances where the audience members are confronted with the unique experience of the artist's suffering.

The performances I have discussed in section one (cultural transgressions) and section two (physical transgressions) test the merits and challenges of participatory forms of performance art attuned to the political. These works seduce and provoke their audiences through their offer of revoking the social contract so that participants can engage with behaviour, whether it be cultural appropriation or corporeal punishment, that would be deemed inappropriate and unacceptable elsewhere. I interrogate what risks are involved in engaging in such behaviour, and for whom. What is the nature and quality of the relationships that result from these performances? How do they translate in a world where intersubjective boundaries are continuously being transgressed and transformed? In what ways are these performances reflecting the power dynamics that are evident in relationships outside the performance space, and how might they affect and reform them? My discussion will engage with the limits of representation and self-objectification

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[76] Meals made in the tradition of Afro-Brazilian culture.

[77] http://www.carlosmartiel.net/posesion/

compared with embodiment and enactment to question who can represent, and how, whose plight.

Sex/Gender Transgressions

Also crucial is the investigation of sex/gender transgressions in contemporary performance art. Following the previous two sections – cultural and physical transgression – this third section highlights the categorical challenge that undergirds the thinking in this paper: sex/gender transgressions are always-already cultural, and since all cultural practices are embodied, also physical. Here, I hold as a given that sexuality and gender are social constructs, their attributes and boundaries determined by the consensus of individuals who share a common culture.[78] Accordingly, the works that will be examined in this section, namely Lori Blondeau and Adrian Stimson's *Putting the Wild Back into the West* (2006-2010), Cassils's *Cuts* (2011-2013) and related works and Andrea Fraser's *Untitled* (2003) could also be included in the previous sections and in some cases, vice versa.

Indeed, described by performance artist Lori Weidenhammer as erotic and cathartic, Lori Blondeau and Adrian Stimson's performance practice, which involves creating photographic evidence of subversive moments, demonstrates how the intersections between cultural, physical, and sex/gender transgressions are indissolubly interwoven. [79] One example of this is *Putting the Wild Back into the West* (2006-2010), a series of interactive performances that "pay homage to the histories of Native performers in the Wild West shows."[80] In these shows, the artists personified their alter egos Belle Sauvage and Buffalo Boy, the latter appearing in high heels, fishnets and pearls and the former

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[78] https://www.who.int/health-topics/gender#tab=tab_1. It must be acknowledged that there are philosophical challenges to this theory, which I address elsewhere.

[79] https://plugin.org/exhibitions/adrian-stimson-and-lori-blondeau-putting-the-wild-back-in-the-west-buffalo-boy-and-belle-sauvage/ and Lori Weidenhammer, "Lori Blondeau and Adrian Stimson," *Border Crossings* 26, iss.1 (March 2007): 91-92.

[80] https://www.mcgill.ca/dise/research/facultyresearchprojects/zhigwe-bs-pww

donning a cowboy/girl look and carrying a whiskey bottle, and invited the audience to take photographs with them in dioramas that depict "the Wild West" as it has been imagined within the settler-colonial cultural imaginary.

Similar to Guillermo Gómez-Peña's *Mexotica*, participants in Blondeau and Stimson's performance were invited to either dress up in costumes prepared by the artists, such as "a white pleather Indian princess dress, beaded suede vests, a ceremonial buffalo robe and … an eagle feather headdress" or bring their own attire to the photo shoot, where they could – and were encouraged to – fulfill any and all transgressive fantasies about race, sex, and gender.[81] While it *is* possible to read these performances as primarily organized around cultural provocation, the fact that they also incorporate subversive gender reversal informed my decision to discuss them in this section. *Putting the Wild Back into the West* playfully and purposefully challenges the white Western gender culture which affirms and promotes the gender-binary as norm and rule. Also important to the performance is that it does this on the invaded land that is called Canada, where the different gender expressions of Two-Spirit (or Indigiqueer) individuals have been systemically suppressed through genocidal means including the residential schools and other settler-colonial institutions.[82]

"Gender cultures (...) define the limits of social tolerance and, in this regard, may be seen within the scope of the overarching cultural system as a whole."[83] As history and politics scholar Sabrina Petra Ramet expounds, "gender culture"[84] is a concept driven from the expanding literature on the social construction of gender. The theorisations in this field

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[81] Lori Weidenhammer, "Lori Blondeau and Adrian Stimson," *Border Crossings* 26, iss.1 (March 2007): 91-92.

[82] "Intersections: Indigenous and 2SLGBTQQIA+ Identities," Native Women's Association of Canada Booklet, https://nwac.ca/assets-knowledge-centre/2S_Intersections_Booklet_V2.pdf

[83] Sabrina Petra Ramet, "Gender Reversals and Gender Cultures: An Introduction," in *Gender Reversal and Gender Cultures: Anthropological and Historical* Perspectives ed. Sabrina Petra Ramet (London: Routledge, 1996), 3.

[84] Other terms are "gender code," "gender ideology," "gender dictates" and "gender policing." SPR 2

primarily focus on the processes by which societies establish and uphold norms of "expected gender-linked behaviour," and the socialization of individuals to conform to these norms.[85] Gender culture, which has also been named "gender policing" is thus concerned with social control and gender reversal, its transgression. Gender reversal, particularly from male to female, has a complex relationship with taboo in Euro-Western societies.[86] Stimson's cross dressing specifically violates a "great taboo" that is widely upheld in patriarchal societies, of men risking appearing like "sissies," losing their "masculine identity" by wearing women's clothing.[87] Lori Blondeau's Belle Sauvage, and Stimson's Buffalo Bill transgress culturally established gender boundaries by embodying and encouraging their cathartic dissolution through performance.

Subversive masculine and feminine expression and representation is also a central concern in trans-masculine artist Cassils's performative works which visually and ontologically challenge hegemonic sexism, cis- and hetero-normativity.[88] Inspired by *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture* (1972), a durational performance and 148-piece series of photographs by Eleanor Antin documenting the artist's weight loss over 45 days, *Cuts: A Traditional Sculpture* (2011) is a performance documented by photography and video for which Cassils gained 1 pound of muscle mass every week for 23 weeks. Like Antin, who crash dieted in a mode being made popular by so-called women's magazines in the 1960s and 1970s in North America, and at the expense of her health, in *Carving*, during

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[85] Ramet, "Gender Reversals" 1.

[86] Ramet, "Gender Reversals," 12-13.

[87] Ramet, "Gender Reversals," 12-13.

[88] Cisnormativity pertains to the belief that an individual's assigned sex at birth will consistently correspond with their gender identification, a false assumption that serves as the foundation for and promotes transphobia. Cisnormativity highlights prevailing societal norms that portray cisgendered bodies as the ideal. Consequently, bodily characteristics and behaviours that fall outside the traditional expectations associated with an individual's given sex at birth are perceived as inferior or deviant. Heteronormativity refers to the dominant belief that heterosexuality is the standard for humankind, and it has been found to hinder body acceptance in sexual and gender minorities, by endorsing "stereotypical gender representation." Abigal Richburg and Abigail J. Stewart, "Body Image Among Sexual and Gender Minorities: An Intersectional Analysis," Journal of Homosexuality 71, no.2 (2024): 320.

the time frame of the performance, Cassils took extreme measures to reshape their body, treating it as an additive, rather than subtractive, sculptural process, facilitated by working out and consuming around 3000 calories every day to transform their body into "a traditionally masculine muscular form."[89]

Documentation is an integral part of *Cuts*. One screen of a two-channel video installation shows Cassils gorging on raw eggs, meat and diet supplements, and "maxing out in near-orgasmic spasms of weightlifting exertion."[90] The other channel projects a 23 second time-lapse video of photographs taken each week to portray the stark transformation of the artist's body. The photographs depict Cassils from front, back, and side views, mimicking those of Antin's, except the artist is wearing underwear that hides their genitals. As interdisciplinary artist and writer Jamee Crusan suggests, "Cassil's concealment of their genitals by wearing brief-style underwear suggests a strong emphasis on which reproductive organs one must have to be considered man or woman while simultaneously de-emphasizing the genitals, forcing further disruption of the gender noncomforming body."[91]

A similar mechanism is at play in *Lady Face/Man Body* and *Advertisement: Homage to Benglis*, which were produced during the first year of *Cuts*, in 2011. As Crusan attests in her comprehensive article on the struggle for visibility for trans men as portrayed and indicated in Cassils's works, the artist "uses tactics of revealing and concealing to convey agency in the struggle for trans or genderqueer individual equality and visibility."[92] Cassils's photographic works decentralize the phallus as a prerequisite of masculinity and replace it with gender fluid visual cues. They amplify gender noncomforming aspects of

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[89] Jeanne Vaccaro, "Embodied Risk: Cassils," QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking 5, no.1 (April 2018): 113. http://new.cassils.net/portfolio/cuts/

[90] https://www.cassils.net/cassils-artwork-cuts

[91] Jamee Crusan, "The Double Edge of Visibility and Invisibility: Cassils and Queer Exhaustion," Refract: An Open Access Visual Studies Journal 1, no.1 (2018): 39.

[92] Crusan, "Queer Exhaustion," 36.

Cassils's individual trans-masc gender expression by juxtaposing aesthetically disparate elements to challenge the cis- and hetero-normative visual regime.

The latter depicts Cassils standing in front of a white background in a spotless jockstrap and bright red lipstick. Their gaze is directed away from the audience towards the distance, allowing them to assume a passive position that invites the active gaze to explore their body.[93] Similar to Benglis's advertisement published in and immediately rescinded from Artforum in November 1974, Cassils dons tan lines, which draw attention their pectoral muscles, "uncut" breasts and piercings, further contributing to Cassils's gender-bending. *Lady Face/Man Body* number 2 and 3 portray Cassils against the same background, staring at the camera. In the first photo the artist is nude, with their hands covering their genitalia while the second (third), depicts them in a black jockstrap. In their analysis of Loren Cameron's nude self-portraits in bodybuilding poses Josch Hoenes concludes that masculinity is associated primarily not with the possession of a penis, but rather with a specifically masculine coded body and it's staging, or representation.[94] Cassils's self-depictions reinforce Hoenes's suggestion.[95]

Cassils's performance and self-portraits are provocative on multiple, nuanced layers. As an embodied practice, which describes "those habits, rituals or performances that are oriented specifically towards intervening in and/or altering 'the body,"[96] they can be construed as physically transgressive of normative gender expression and performance. In their paper focusing on several interpenetrated facets of bodybuilding such as

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[93] I have addressed the gaze, and specifically, the male gaze, in different lectures, as outlined in my syllabus.

[94] Josch Hoenes, "Images et formations de corps d'hommes trans," Cahiers du Genre 2, no.45 (2008): 43-57, abstract.

[95] The impact of the different mediums used in the documentation of this durational performance will be an important consideration in my thesis that I will expand to my discussion of the other works I address.

[96] Carolyn Pedwell, *Feminism, Culture and Embodied Practice: The Rhetorics of Comparison* (London: Routledge, 2010), 132.

"purposeful gender transgressions, gender attribution, racialized bodies, and the conflation of sex, gender, and sexual preference," McGarth and Chananie-Hill agree that bodybuilding, when undertaken by assigned-female-at-birth bodies, can become subversive and transgress normative gender boundaries since muscularity is traditionally associated with masculinity which is dialectically construed against femininity.[97] As scholar E. Hella Tscaconas notes about *Cuts*, "the bounded, durational process of building a body destabilizes the hegemony of normative gender by producing the remarkable copresence of a virtuosic masculine musculature manifest on a putatively female body."[98]

Cassils's body of works "disrupts normalized gender ideals and adds to the trans landscape in the realm of performance-based visual practice while testifying to the struggle and endurance it takes to exist outside the hetero/homonormative structure of the gender binary."[99] Richburg and Stewart describe the gender-binary as "the pervasive, socially sanctioned belief in two-discrete, biologically-based gender/sex categories that remain constant throughout life."[100] In their study on body image among sexual and gender minorities the authors identify cisnormativity, sexism, and heteronormativity, as the negative outcomes of the gender-binary. These elements operate and intersect at a societal level and influence individuals' self perceptions.

"Despite their identification as men, trans men uniquely experience oppression from sexism, cisnormativity, and heteronormativity."[101] Sexism is ingrained within the

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[97] Shelly A. McGarth and Ruth A. Chananie-Hill, "'Big freaky-looking women': Normalizing Gender Transgressions Through Bodybuilding," *Sociology of Sport Journal* 26, iss.2 (2009): 236-237.
As well as reinforcing them in the case of women bodybuilders who often take extra measures such as breast enlargements and feminizing hairstyles to counteract the association of muscularity and masculinity.

[98] E. Hella Tsaconas, "Bad Math: Calculating Bodily Capacity in Cassils's Cuts: A Traditional Sculpture," *Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 26 (2016): 197-207.

[99] Crusan, "Queer Exhaustion," 36.

[100] Richburg and Stewart, "Body Image," 320.

[101] Richburg and Stewart, "Body Image," 323.

framework of gender socialization and contributes to the perpetuation of body image issues, which results in decreased mental health, particularly amongst women and trans men, who are at a higher risk for self-objectification. Cassils's works bring into question the potentials and limitations of self-objectification, a strategy often utilized by marginalized artists to bring attention to the problematics of their objectification and/or erasure by the hegemony. The sensitive overlaps between self-objectification, its risks, and the struggle of minoritized peoples for representation and visibility is an important consideration that I have discussed, in the context of *Homage to Benglis,* which was pulled from an exhibition in Germany after the organizers decided that the image was too "sexualized" and "sexist."[102]

Cuts, as a durational art performance that significantly alters the artist's body and has irreversible impact on their everyday existence calls into question the so-called dichotomy between art and life which, as I have explored in my syllabus, has been an inherent field of interest in contemporary performance art practices. Andrea Fraser's *Untitled* (2003), "a project and a DVD" is another example of artwork that brings into question whether art, particularly performance art, which is necessarily an embodied practice, can be delineated from life and lived experience.[103]

For *Untitled* Fraser met with an anonymous art collector to have sex with him and to produce documentation of the encounter. Although the artist received payment for this work, as she emphasizes, the fee was symbolic, paid for the resulting video documentation (of which there were five copies, one belonging to the collector, one to the artist and the rest, to select museums and galleries) rather than the sexual act itself.[104] The video shows the two individuals conversing, having sex, and relaxing for the duration of

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[102] Crusan, "Queer Exhaustion," 43.

[103] Rhea Anastas, Alejandro Cesarco, and Andrea Fraser ed., *Andrea Fraser: Collected Interviews 1990-2018* (New York: A.R.T. Press, 2019), 424.

[104] Anastas, Cesarco and Fraser, *Andrea Fraser*, 226-227.

an hour in a single, uninterrupted shot from the viewpoint of the camera installed on the ceiling of the hotel room in which the couple convened. Although, given its content (sexual intercourse) and form (video recording), the work can be construed as merely pornographic[105], the stationary perspective of the camera distinguishes the work as an art performance rather than a spectacle as sex is generally presented in mainstream porn. "Unlike conventional male-centered pornography that is shot and edited in a way that gives the male viewer a 'place' in the action and access to the body on display, *Untitled* offers no such opportunity for personal projection," positioning the viewer instead as a decentralized voyeur.[106]

As the artist explained, *Untitled* on one level is an "extreme literalization of the old metaphor of selling art as prostitution, of the artist as prostitute."[107] As a project that was actualized in the U.S., where despite its historical and contemporary prevalence, sex work continues to be condemned and criminalized, *Untitled* is overtly transgressive of established sexual and cultural norms. On another level, as art historian Susan E. Cahan points out, the performance is an enactment of the dissolution of the material-based interactions that pervade capitalist societies. "The piece does more than merely use prostitution as a metaphor for the artist/collector relationship, it embodies a form of resistance to commodity fetishism and a reinvestment in the power of human interaction."[108] Cahan explains that *Untitled* achieves this by stripping the interaction from material mediation which, according to Marx's theory of commodity fetishism,

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[105] In her critical book, *Sex Objects*, art historian Jennifer Doyle opposes such dichotomy, asserting instead that 'the idea that art and pornography are mutually exclusive opposites is more convenient than it is true.' Jennifer Doyle, Sex Objects: Art and the Dialectics of Desire (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), xxxi.

[106] Susan E. Cahan, "Regarding Andrea Fraser's *Untitled*," *Social Semiotics* 16, no.1 (April 2006): 14.

[107] Anastas, Cesarco and Fraser, *Andrea Fraser*, 226.

[108] Cahan, "Regarding," 9

results in the labourer's alienation from their product.[109] By relocating the focus on relations among people rather than relations among things Fraser's work defies the process of alienation that characterizes socio-economic as well as personal interactions under capitalism.

Personal agency, especially as it pertains to the arena of sex work, is another well-theorized notion explored in *Untitled*. Some scholars who commit to the anti-sex work tendency in feminist discourse perceive and portray all sex workers as "coerced slaves and victims of 'false consciousness'" who can not have consented to their role, based on the premise that said role is necessarily undesirable and unacceptable for all women as it is a violation of human rights.[110] Anti-sex work perspective conclusively proposes that sex workers lack agency. Conversely and simultaneously, feminist scholar Anne McClintock points out, sex workers are "castigated for having an excess of agency, as irresponsibly trafficking in male fantasies and commodification." [111]

Art historian Jennifer Doyle, in her book *Sex Objects: Art and the Dialectics of Desire* refers to the dual role that the figure of the sex worker plays in anti-sex work campaigns, of the unsophisticated, incapacitated victim and of the seductive, imprudent whore as a "pathology of agency."[112] Fraser's performance poses a challenge to this phenomenon as it brings into question why an educated woman well-versed in Marxist theory would publicly engage in transactional sexual relations. Indeed, in fitting with the artist's prediction who stated in an interview with art historian Miwon Kwon in 2002 that the piece would be interpreted as "a facile critique that aims to expose the desire or exhibitionism of the collector," and/or "as a cynical kind of self-exploitation posing as

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[109] Cahan, "Regarding," 9.

[110] Anna Maria Pinaka, "Porno-graphing: 'Dirty' Subjectivities & Self-objectification in Contemporary Lens-based Art," PhD. thesis, University of Roehampton, 2017, 52.

[111] Anne McClintock, "Sex Workers and Sex Work: Introduction," *Social Text*, no. 37 (1993): 7. And PhD 52.

[112] Doyle, *Sex Objects*, 49.

critique,"[113] *Untitled* received negative critiques from journalists who "have had trouble reading the work as anything but a sign of moral decline and have mocked its theoretical underpinnings."[114]

Similar to Cassils's *Cuts* and related works, Fraser's *Untitled* brings into question whether and how self-objectification is an effective strategy when engaging in transgressive work that challenges widely held beliefs about gender, sex, and conduct. Self-objectification and adopting and utilizing questionable stereotypes are incisive strategies utilized in the works discussed in the section on cultural transgressions which links my thinking.

As Rebecca Schneider notes in *The Explicit Body in Performance*:

> At base, the explicit body in much feminist work interrogates socio-cultural understandings of the "appropriate" and/or the appropriately transgressive – particularly who gets to mark what (in)appropriate where, and who has the right to appropriate what where- keeping in mind the double meaning of the word "appropriate."[115]

Summary

The works by James Luna, Guillermo Gómez-Peña, Coco Fusco and La Pocha Nostra which I have discussed in the first section of this paper on cultural transgressions shed unique light on the question of appropriation and appropriateness, which, given that these are socio-cultural concepts, always have the capacity to the transgressive. Their performances invite the reader/participant to enact and reflect on their capacity and willingness to engage with stereotypes. I recall here the theorizations of Stuart Hall who studies representations in the visual regime and media in *Representation*: *Cultural*

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[113] Anastas, Cesarco and Fraser, *Andrea Fraser*, 216.

[114] Cahan, "Regarding," 10.

[115] Rebecca Schneider, The Explicit Body in Performance (London: Routledge, 1997), 3.

Representations and Signifying Practices. In his 1997 book Hall proposes that "the spectacle of the Other" is construed and experienced by utilizing stereotypes, and examines whether certain images reinforce or subvert stereotypes, as well as the impact this has on the social collective, providing a framework upon which I can build my investigation.[116] Hall's and other poststructuralist theorists' understanding of representation as intertextual, meaning, contextual and derivate will play an important role in my evaluation of the political efficacy of the works in engaging with an audience whose consciousness might be oversaturated with imagery disseminated by a so-called multicultural but inherently racist media, during an era where identity politics is simultaneously championed and voided to the same effect.

The next section on physical transgressions expands further the question of who can represent whose suffering, who can enact or reenact it, and whether, when and how an artist's self-inflicted pain can be relevant to the collective's physic wounds which has real consequences in the violent age in which we live. The questions brought up in this section about the affects of witnessing and engaging in transgressive and sometimes violent acts in the domain of artistic practice are imperative and urgent for those interested in art and social change in the 21st century, specifically, those who question what performance art might have to offer as a response to and intervention into a world in crisis. Freud wrote in his 1915 essay "Thoughts on Times of War and Death" that fiction, literature, and theater were productive arenas that offer "compensation for what has been lost in life," to humans coping with or in denial of the reality of death, especially when it is encountered (or experienced) in mass scale, as often is the case today for viewers who receive news via the media.[117] "In the realm of fiction we find the plurality of lives which

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[116] Stuart Hall, ed. *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage Publications, 1997), 257-262.

[117] Sigmund Freud, "Thoughts for the Times on War and Death," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud vol. XIV Om the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement Papers on Metaphsychology and Other Works*, trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1957, 291.

we need. We die with the hero with whom we have identified ourselves; yet we survive him, and are ready to die again just as safely as with another hero."[118]

Pace Freud, however, durational and endurance performance works, exemplified by Carlos Martiel's, Mike Parr's, and Wafaa Bilal's performances, prompt the audience to observe the degradation of the artist's physical and emotional well-being over the duration of the performance, which disallows the viewers to engage in the quick detachment and re-attachment process that Freud describes. By staying with the artist through the often-painful process of the performance the audience is provided the opportunity to develop their empathy, to test where their individual resistances to another's suffering lie in their psyche (which often comes in the form of dismissal or depreciation, which is an ego-protective narcissistic mechanism that needs to be addressed to operate in a healthy society) and to heal these wounds. As Julia Kristeva, whose psychoanalytical theories on abjection and Othering will provide a bases for my inquiries might suggest, confrontation with abjection, as materialized in the figure of the artist in pain, can offer reconciliation with the personally and historically abject-ed (the Other) that extends beyond the instance of encounter during the performance, to have broader positive social impact.

The final section on sex/gender transgressions similarly interrogates works where the artists endanger their emotional and physical health to provoke a response that registers on a psychological level for the audience as well as the artist and have direct social impact. Given that gender and sexual expression are socio-cultural constructs, and their reception and evaluation are necessarily socio-culturally constructed impressions, the works discussed in this section by Lori Blondeau, Andrian Stimson, Andrea Fraser, and Cassils could also be addressed in the first section. By the fact of these works centralizing on the artists' bodies, they would also fit well into the section on physical transgressions. One reason that led me to offer a different category for these works was to refrain from

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[118] Ibid.

upholding normative cultural constructs that would for instance deem Fraser's performance as in fact transgressive of cultural norms, thereby contributing to the discriminatory falsehood that suggests sex-work to be a morally condemnable act out of the norm, or dismiss Cassils's trans masculine gender identity as "abnormal", which, regrettably, is the norm in many, and not all, societies. Indeed, in the cultural landscape of Indigenous artists Stimson and Blondeau, dressing as another gender might not be culturally transgressive, and thus should not be read as such, except to read it intertextually, against the colonized land on which the performance took place, and its dominant culture, through an anti-sexist, anti-colonial, anti-racist, anti-hetero-cisnormative perspective.

An overarching theme in the works I have selected is the willingness of the artists to open themselves vulnerably to harm, be it emotional or physical, self-inflicted or delivered through the audience or the secondary receivers of the works. As I have highlighted in my historiography, performances where artists engage in self-harm are often underlain with humanistic sociopolitical concerns and deserve insightful and thoughtful inquiry that resists the reactive psychological mechanisms that might be in effect when evaluating the performance and the performer who is an abject "Other." Further, the reactions and responses of the participants and witnesses of such and other transgressive performances offer a study of the psychological and social mechanisms that operate when an individual engages in or encounters transgression. This micro-study can lend insight into larger scale humanistic concerns given the prominence and magnitude of reactivity to transgressions which can come in the form of murder, rape, and torture of the individual who is perceived to have transgressed. The audience's reaction to the performances discussed is thus a critical consideration that has broader implications about what contemporary performance art can offer to a world riddled with cultural, physical, and sexual conflict and violence.

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