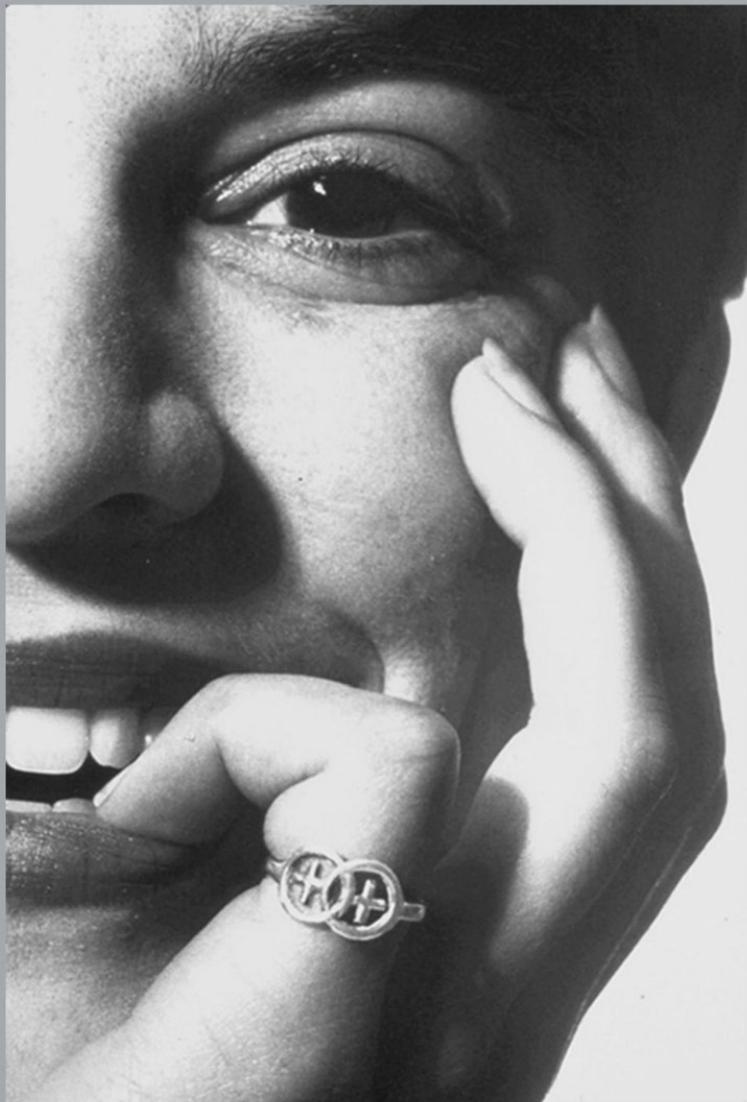


# Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory



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Living Labor: Marxism and  
Performance Studies

## Living Labor: Marxism and Performance Studies

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*Capital is dead labor, which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labor,  
and lives the more, the more labor it sucks.*

– Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1<sup>1</sup>

To live and to labor are the twinned imperatives to which we are always already given. Together, they animate a rhythm of material production and reproduction that extends over time. This special issue of *Women & Performance* examines how thinking about life and labor between Marxism and Performance Studies can help us attend to the world at hand. *Living Labor* began as a conference hosted by the department of Performance Studies at New York University, which took place 11–13 April 2014. It featured over 70 presentations, film screenings, artist presentations, and keynote addresses by Fred Moten and Sianne Ngai. The provocation of this conference was to ask what formal criteria could be articulated between aesthetic analysis and political economy. That is, how does performance analysis bring together the living body and the working body? How do Marxist and Marxist-inspired philosophies articulate and reimagine labor, value, and revolutionary struggle, particularly in relation to the social, aesthetic, and political dimensions of performance and performativity? How are theories of difference – which cut across the divisions of race, gender, sexuality, and disability – differently animated by the many histories of anti-capitalist critique? The collected essays, short texts, and artworks that comprise this special issue include versions of the papers presented at the conference as well as new contributions from cultural producers and theorists. They explore not only what Marxism and Performance Studies have in common, but also how these overlapping bodies of literature might act as provocations for one another, intellectual and otherwise.

In our contemporary moment of post-Fordist capitalism, and particularly within the spheres of cultural production, life and labor have become increasingly indistinguishable. The capitalist mode of production goes beyond the organization of social life reaching into the very structure and regulation of the subject itself. While these conditions could be understood as an indication of the inescapability of capitalist social relations, they

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also provide an imperative for renewed critical attention: they demand that we sharpen the tools with which we theorize the division between life and labor as well as the new configurations of their enmeshment. Such theorization will perhaps offer ways of being in the world that disrupt the production and circulation of value as well as the reproduction of ideologized subjectivities. We return to Marx's texts in order to unlock a sense of selfhood that is inextricably tied to the field of the social. It is our contention that anti-normative and anti-capitalist struggles must engage and contest the specific ideologies of subjectivity that are deeply embroiled in structures of patriarchy, heterosexuality, and white supremacy. To this end, our work is galvanized by scholarship that brings together critiques of capitalism with questions of subjecthood and difference – in particular, Cedric Robinson and Fred Moten's formulations of the black radical tradition;<sup>2</sup> Silvia Federici and Angela Mitropoulos's theorizations of reproductive labor;<sup>3</sup> Angela Davis's writing and activism around prison abolition and Premilla Nadasen's on the history of welfare rights<sup>4</sup>; as well as José Esteban Muñoz's and Sianne Ngai's mobilizations of the aesthetic as a critical and potentially utopian site.<sup>5</sup> We insist on the possibility of life in opposition to labor – that is, forms of life that resist the structuring axioms, ideologies, and infrastructures of capitalism. The collective project of *Living Labor* is to read between the lines of Marx's own thinking, to illuminate the many ways difference is organized under the rule of capitalism towards exploitations and oppression, and, perhaps most significantly, to explore ways we might think difference *differently*.

We write this introduction in the immediate aftermath of the 2016 US presidential election – a moment that has crystallized a certain feeling among the Left of a world embroiled in crisis. Already, we have seen the hate speech that characterized the president-elect's campaign reproduced in acts of vandalism, intimidation, and physical violence, some of which have taken place on the university campuses where we work. Each day, overtly fascistic discourse becomes more normalized – a xenophobic, racist, misogynist, homophobic, and ableist rebuke to the ethic of non-violence with which we write and teach. For some the proximity to hatred is new, while for others it is a national amplification of the violence that is already part of daily existence. We have only just begun to think about where we go from here: how to parse the 2016 election through the much longer histories of repression and exploitation targeting minoritarian subjects; how to compare the ascent of a fascistic regime in the United States to larger shifts in neoliberal global politics that have reshaped life on an ideological, cultural, and subjective level. We work with the knowledge that visible enactments of violence are haunted by instances of violence made invisible, ignored conditions of inequality, dispossession, and abuse – many of which compose the foundation on which nations like the United States have been built. For us, the editors of this special issue, Marxism is not simply a science of working-class revolution, nor is Performance Studies merely the wholesale embrace of performativity and postmodern critique. Rather these two fields offer a shared imperative of reimagining the ways in which we both theorize and practice the social. It is in this light that we hope this volume will be a resource as we collectively struggle to process, organize, and respond to the world in which we find ourselves.

As modes of inquiry, Performance Studies and Marxism both offer ways of thinking through the imbrication of life and labor. Performance Studies is an interdisciplinary discourse in which questions of life and labor are central, surfacing in notions of action, endurance, repetition. It offers a hermeneutic challenge to semiotic formulations of meaning and

value by asking not what things *mean*, but what they *do*. Similarly, Marxist theory attends to the capture and distribution of life: to the maintenance and reproduction of labor power, as well as to the processes of commodification and consumption that produce value for capital. In its many iterations, Marxist theory provides a methodology of thinking about materiality, temporality, and movement that revivifies an enduring question in Performance Studies: *What can a body do?* This question not only makes explicit the convergence between Marxist and performance theory, but also makes central critical traditions of black, feminist, and queer theory in which relationships between life, labor, and capitalism have never been incidental. The material experience and historical condition of race, gender, and sexuality is, in this sense, the premise that animates our Marxist considerations of what it means to live, labor, and perform. On the one hand, applying a Performance Studies methodology to Marxism adds an aesthetic dimension to abstract questions of labor, foregrounding the enflashed and emoting body as a locus of action. On the other hand, embracing Marxist and materialist critique in Performance Studies reinvigorates questions of live-ness, the event, and performative force in relation to larger frameworks of ideology and power. Such conjunctions operate in opposition to the conventional divide between (economic) base and (cultural) superstructure. They illuminate a new set of questions: To what degree are our social formations determined by prevailing economic conditions? How much can culture broadly play a role in the reorganization of economic structures that not only uphold but also reproduce the unequal distribution of wealth and the systematic exploitation and oppression of the many by the wealthiest few?

“Living Labor” is a term drawn directly from the work of Karl Marx. In the first volume of *Capital*, Marx describes living labor as “labour-power in action.” An enigmatic concept, *living labor* marks a distinction between *labor* – the activity of work which is legible as productive, often producing goods, services, and commodities that uphold the global circulation of capital – and *labor-power*: the capacity to work, which is present even when not yet actualized, and can be sold by the worker for a wage. Specifically, living labor revivifies the products of expended labor through the enactment of their use value. As Marx writes:

A machine which does not serve the purposes of labour, is useless. In addition, it falls prey to the destructive influence of natural forces. Iron rusts and wood rots. Yarn with which we neither weave nor knit, is cotton wasted. Living labour must seize upon these things and rouse them from their death-sleep, change them from mere possible use-values into real and effective ones. Bathed in the fire of labour, appropriated as part and parcel of labour’s organism, and, as it were, made alive for the performance of their functions in the process, they are in truth consumed, but consumed with a purpose, as elementary constituents of new use-values, of new products, ever ready as means of subsistence for individual consumption, or as means of production for some new labour-process.<sup>6</sup>

Living labor is necessary to the reproduction of capitalism itself: it provides the vital energies, that “fire of labour,” that can revivify labor’s dead products, which are again “made alive for the performance of their functions.” The means of subsistence, which can be immediately consumed by the individual, are transformed into new means for production, which are consumed through the labor process. This illuminates a circular temporality wherein the product is both the result and animating condition of the process, and use value is dependent on the living labor that would utilize it. Or as Marx goes on to say,

“by incorporating living labour with [the commodity’s] dead substance, the capitalist at the same time converts value, i.e., past, materialised, and dead labour into capital, into value big with value, a live monster that is fruitful and multiplies.”<sup>7</sup>

Importantly, living labor stands in opposition to “dead” labor – which is *capital*, the accumulation of expended labor in the form of money. Dead labor is also the *means of production*, concretized in not only the machines and technologies which facilitate the expansion of capital, but the systems, order, and (super)structures which similarly facilitate the smooth flow of capitalist production. Dead, dormant, such tools await their use: they are valueless without their potential activation by the laborer. In this sense, dead labor is not quite dead, but vampiric – *hungry*. It depends on a purloined vitality, the “living blood of labour”<sup>8</sup> transubstantiated into value, an animate and re-animating circulation contingent upon the perpetual expropriation of life. Living labor gestures to the very contingency on which the entire circulation of value within capitalism depends. Without the *labor-power in action* of the laborer that puts the capital (dead labor) to work, the extraction and augmentation of value so central to the vitality of capitalism falls by the wayside. The bloodlust of dead labor for the energy of the living speaks to the ways in which capitalism has always been not only a project of exploitation but also of desire. Stories of vampirism always include the seduction before the bite. Living labor could in this sense be further understood as the performance of the body under the structures of capitalism and within the temporality of the capitalist mode of production – the lure of its promise of the good life always just on the horizon. In acts that do more than merely seize control of the mode of production, living labor bristles with a spontaneity capable of fracturing, stalling, and overwhelming the central drive of capitalism’s expansion.

As a spontaneous activation derived from the body of the worker, living labor is both central to the function of capitalism, yet also offers a potential site of resistance. In the preface to their book *Labor of Dionysus: A Critique of the State-Form*, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri offer a useful affirmation of the potential of living labor. Noting the concepts of life and labor as inimical to the subject of capitalist exploitation, they write:

Living labor produces life and constitutes society in a time that cuts across the division posed by the workday, inside and outside the prisons of capitalist work and its wage relation, in both the realm of work and that of nonwork. It is a seed that lies waiting under the snow, or more accurately, the life force always already active in the dynamic networks of cooperation, in the production and reproduction of society, that courses in and out of the time posed by capital.<sup>9</sup>

Hardt and Negri posit living labor as a concept that troubles the temporal organization upon which capitalist expropriation depends – specifically the divide between working and non-working hours. How to reserve these ‘seeds beneath the snow’ from the mere exposure and cooptation by existing systems of value remains the crucial work of a number of the contributions to this special issue. In particular, Gregory Sholette’s “Swampwalls: Dark Matter and the Lumpen Army of Art” takes a critical look at the role of the non-productive within late capitalism, using art as a means to explore new ways of valuing the unproductive (the lumpen) underneath or around the machinations of a more formal economy. Similarly, Joshua Chambers-Letson’s “Performance’s Mode of Reproduction, Part I: Searching for Danh Võ’s Mother” closely reads the work of this contemporary artist, shifting the

paradigm from the question of production to reproductive labor and the absent figure of the maternal as the revolutionary work of performance theory. Fred Moten's "COLLECTIVE HEAD," which shares its title with a work by artist Lygia Clark, explores the work of Masao Miyoshi, José Estaban Muñoz, and Clark (among others) to consider "the real assembly or assemblage that is present outside and underneath the city's absence," or in other words, that life which is the precondition and irruption of any prescriptive models for valuing life and labor. First offered as a keynote at the *Living Labor* conference, "COLLECTIVE HEAD" is an exemplary instance of what performative writing can do. Moten's is a generous scholarship: one that takes seriously the call that beauty makes, one that finds a plentitude in the form of its demand.

In one of his more famous passages from the *Theses on Feuerbach*, Karl Marx writes that "the philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it."<sup>10</sup> Within the humanities – and particularly the field of performance studies – the question of how to enact change in the world is often theorized through art practice. Artists and artwork have become the "objects of study" for academic scholarship, and scholarship a "diagram" for art practice, one form of cultural capital becoming another. Seeking to examine and complicate this relation, a special panel was organized for the *Living Labor* conference titled "ART/WORK," bringing together five artists to show their work, do their work, and/or reflect on broader ideas on working and at work within the field of contemporary art and culture. For the experimental "&" section of this special issue of *Women & Performance* we have attempted to extend the space of this original panel, including writing, interventions, and artwork from a cross-section of artist and scholars whose work puts pressure on the epistemological function of both of these fields – works that not only attempt to disseminate knowledge but to produce it. Dyke Action Machine (DAM!) is a project by artist Carrie Moyer and photographer Sue Schaffner that combines the Situationist's practice of *detournement* with the slickness of 1990s advertisements to jam the seamless union between corporate advertising and cultural ideology. Their work powerfully explores the figuration of the lesbian through both presence and absence, "questioning the basic assumption that one cannot be 'present' in a capitalist society unless one exists as a consumer group." Artist Alan Ruiz's "Radical Formalism" revises the terms of formalist critique in order to explore the way in which form might perform today not only as a vessel of conservative beliefs, but also as a kind of subversive strategy for infiltrating the conditions of globalization and the reproduction of social hierarchies. Turning from the formal to the figurative, artist Juliana Huxtable's "Untitled (Lines Bodies)" brings fantastical imagery and poetic text to explore the mediated constructions of self – the cyborgian body whose lines of fracture are both a mark of her hyper-circulation as well as political potentiality. Lastly, utilizing recent work by Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge on living labor, scholar and writer Soyoung Yoon attends to questions of the productive body, exploring the work of artist Judith Scott and the legacy of Institutional Critique.

This publication comes out almost three years after that event – late, even by academic publishing standards. In revisiting the questions that prompted us to organize the conference – particularly the question of time and its relation to both labor and performance – we have been reflecting on this idea of late-ness, on the larger implications of what it means to be too late, to lag behind, to be out of time with the rhythm of capital. Lateness may be said to permeate any number of the key terms taken up by this special issue. There is

the belatedness of performance scholarship and writing, especially in its relation to the live event. There is also the lateness of a revolutionary struggle that is, at least according to Marxist critique, already underway and at the horizon of social life. Showing up late to work can even be one way of asserting agency against the demanding rhythm, the ticking clock, of capitalism. A number of the authors in this special issue focus on the radical potentialities latent in the bodies performing in and out of time. Harmony Jankowski's "Ted Shawn's *Labor Symphony*: Aesthetic Work and Productive Performance" closely examines the work of Ted Shawn's all-male dance company from the 1930s, troubling the parallel most conventionally drawn between the productive body and masculinity. On a similar note, E. Hella Tsaconas' article "Bad Math: Calculating Bodily Capacity in Cassils's *Cuts: A Traditional Sculpture*" mobilizes the sketchy arithmetic of Karl Marx as a generative resource in reading the concept of bodily capacity in and beyond the work of artist Cassils, showing the degree to which timing and measurement can not only codify but reorganize the concept of the body itself. Liz Kinnamon's article "Attention Under Repair: Asceticism from Self-Care to 'Care of the Self'" examines another type of durational bodily capacity in the form of recent corporate discourses on "mindfulness" – the worker's capacity to pay attention – exploring asceticism's dual function as both a tool of capital accumulation as well as self-fulfillment. Finally, "Pulses from the Multitude: Virtuosity and Black Feminist Discourse," a co-authored work by Maya Winfrey and Beth Stinson, organizes time in a different way, reminding us of the *longue duree* of racist and misogynistic violence within capitalism. Staging a critique of the authoritarian State and racialized capitalist formations, they explore alternative models of collective resistance in a dialogue that brings together Paolo Virno's concept of the multitude with two arenas of black feminist protest that took place on social media in the latter half of 2013. These articles – though utterly timely – arrive to publication late. Nonetheless, we ask readers to experience these collected works against the conventional demands for newness within art and academia. Reading late can be one small way of breaking open the rigid control capitalism maintains over the body.

Still, *Living Labor: Marxism and Performance Studies* is overshadowed by an even more explicit lateness – that of a mentor and friend. What began as a conference originally organized in collaboration with our advisor José Esteban Muñoz, quickly became an event of celebration, remembrance, and mourning after he passed away quite suddenly in December 2013. Muñoz's work and teaching continues to be a guiding resource for a vast array of scholars seeking critiques of capitalism that go beyond a vulgar class reductionism, and that depart from the conventions of a revolution that would simply propose to seize the mode of production. His scholarship abounds with references to the idea of lingering, delaying, staying or being with, and other ways of showing up late to demands of the present-ness as both an affective and political condition that goes far beyond a simple aversion to normative temporality. Among the many things that Muñoz's work has taught us is that the queer way legacy works is by orienting us towards a figure that is gone and also not yet here – past and present shackled up together, falling outside of a strictly productive time, giving time over to creating something else between them. There are many specters that haunt this special issue, some more personal and powerful than others. All of which call on a different way of imagining how knowledge is produced, shared, and mobilized across space and time. Spread out in this way, the project of *Living Labor* extends far beyond this special issue or the conference on which it is based. It is a project that many

scholars will sense and activate in different ways. To live labor is to negotiate the extended processes of reproducing ourselves and others. To live labor is to engage the material conditions that traverse personhood and thinghood. To live labor is to attend to the forces, resonances, and energies that intertwine the affects and objects of everyday life.

### Notes on contributors

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### Notes

1. Marx (1887, vol 1. 163).
2. Robinson (1983) and Moten (2003).
3. See Federici (2004) and Mitropoulos (2012).
4. See Davis (2003) and Premilla (2011).
5. See Muñoz (2009) and Ngai (2012).
6. Marx (1887, 130).
7. Marx (1887, 136).
8. Marx (1887, 175).
9. Hardt and Negri (1994, Preface 1).
10. Marx (2002).

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## Performance's mode of reproduction I: searching for Danh Võ's mother

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This essay returns to key debates in performance theory regarding the relationship between performance and reproduction, offering a Marxian inflected theory of performance's mode of reproduction. It suggests that both performance theory and Marxist theory appropriate the mother function in describing performance's mode of reproduction and the reproduction of capital, while displacing the mother in the process. Through a reading of the work of contemporary artist Danh Võ, the essay explores how performance's mode of reproduction can affect the reproduction and sustenance of minoritarian life against historical, social, and economic forces of elision, erasure, and annihilation.

**Keywords:** reproduction; Danh Võ; performance theory

### Another ontology of performance: "Metal"

It's an unusually hot afternoon on October 17<sup>th</sup>, 2014, and we're standing at the base of the brick facade of New York's legendary performance space, The Kitchen. We move through heavy glass doors into the cool interior and make our way past a vast concrete reception area into a small antechamber in which we chose the stairs over the elevator. At first, it sounds like noise, but as we rise the cacophony organizes itself into recognizable and simultaneously ungraspable fragments of music. These booms and crashes are tethered to something evoking the steady tick tock of a massive wooden clock's escapement. We reach the second floor and walk through the door to turn left, moving down a cave-like corridor that opens out into a brightly lit performance space. People are spread around the room's perimeter, leaning up against the wall, crouching along the floors, or seated on silver metal chairs spread few and far between.

The space is framed with temporary white plaster walls. In the center of the room is an area in which the post-punk band Xiu Xiu is performing one of 52 separate musical compositions that constitute the soundtrack to "Metal," a performance installation and collaboration between visual artist Danh Võ and Xiu Xiu. This event is staged three hours a day, for five days a week over the four weeks of the installation. Xiu Xiu's section of the performance space is a small city of xylophones, cymbals, bells, and other percussive instruments. A southern wall of gongs flanks this sonic metropolis. In the heart of this settlement are bags of candy and boxes of battery-operated sex toys, among other things, all

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employed by the band as they realize a score composed by frontman Jamie Stewart. Adorning the surrounding walls is a host of elements provided by Vỗ. This includes reproductions of a nineteenth-century letter from a French missionary in Vietnam (an independent work titled “2.2.1861”), as well as a poem by queer Cuban literary genius Virgilio Piñera. The artist’s father, Phùng Vỗ (hereafter Phùng), drafted both reproductions. The west wall is covered by more of Phùng’s calligraphy and features fragments of song lyrics by Xiu Xiu, Berlin’s 1986 ballad “Take My Breath Away,” and quotes by theater theorist Antonin Artaud and queer theorist Leo Bersani. Two large MDF panels on the east wall, also written by Phùng, feature lyrics from Nico’s “Afraid” and Rihanna’s “Only Girl (in the World).”

The calligraphy is immediately recognizable for spectators familiar with Vỗ’s work. It was prominently featured just a year before in “Mother Tongue,” his 2013 installation at New York’s Marian Goodman Gallery. There, the titular piece featured an ink-on-paper drawing (at about 25 by 31 inches) with the word “moth/erto/rgue” misspelled and written in an ornate, gothic script across three rows. The same font appeared elsewhere in the gallery, drawn in red ink on the side of gold-leaf adorned shipping boxes. For “Metal,” Vỗ continues to employ his father’s hand. Unlike the precision and integrity of the calligraphy in “Mother Tongue,” however, many of the marks in “Metal” register as incomplete drafts. Across the walls they are rendered in pencil and ink and some of them have been worked over, showing signs of erasure and distress. There is an emphasis on the illustrative process behind the calligraphy that departs from the finality of the script in earlier iterations.

Gold leaf, too, makes an appearance in “Metal.” Against the northern wall, next to the door through which audience members enter, is a traditional Thai gold-pounding station. Here, we watch a father-and-son team of Bangkok-based gold pounders, Nantapol and Puan Panicharam, engage in the exhausting and monotonous process of flattening 24-carat squares of gold into gold leaf to be used in Vỗ’s upcoming installation at the Venice Biennale. This physically demanding and sometimes painful process takes about three hours, during which time the Panicharams and Xiu Xiu make music together. The percussive pounding of the gold leaf is relentless and sets the standard tempo for the performance. At times Xiu Xiu follows alongside the Panicharams, weaving through, across, in and out of the spaces between the tonic strike of the mallets. At other times, however, Xiu Xiu and the Panicharams seem to be in different worlds: the sounds crash violently against each other as Xiu Xiu departs from the guiding tempo of the gold pounders to go off in new directions.

That the Panicharams and Xiu Xiu’s performance resets and repeats itself daily elicits comparison to the mundane and repetitive cycle of work that is central to the reproduction of capitalism. The time it takes for the Panicharams to pound the gold leaf determines the amount of time of each day’s performance. Stewart’s compositions are divided by something that evokes a classic factory or school bell – sounds associated with the reproductive cycle of the workday: the call to work and its conclusion. There is a clear division of labor on display contrasting the flexible, autonomous working conditions of an experimental group of “first world” musicians and the ethnographic display of “third world” laborers who endure a repetitive, monotonous, physically demanding routine. “Metal” also exploits and exposes an uneven global labor system that has produced one Southeast Asian father-

and-son team (the Vös) as darlings of the international art market while a superficially similar father-and-son team (the Panicharams) are present as racialized, working-class labor in its paradigmatic (and paradigmatically gendered) form.

In its own way “Metal” is a representation of the often-recited story that occupies the first volume of *Capital* and large stretches of the *Grundrisse*, representing a major component of the process through which capital is reproduced. Marx puts the production and circulation of commodities at the center of his theory of capital’s (auto)reproductive cycle (production, distribution, exchange, consumption, repeat), showing us how this process scrubs the commodity of all traces of its background and of the work and workers that produced it.<sup>1</sup> In a seeming negation of this negation, “Metal” rematerializes the lost scene of production and focuses the spectator’s gaze upon productive labor as it is being performed. The title situates the spectator in the moment of or before erasure, emphasizing the Panicharams’ labor as it mediates a raw material (metal), transforming it into a commodity (gold). The spectator stands in the presence of the progression through which “commodities must be realized as values before they can be realized as use-values.”<sup>2</sup> If Marx understood value, as in Gayatri Spivak’s summary, as “the representation of objectified-labor,” we can say that “Metal” invites the spectator to witness the process through which value and capital are realized and reproduced through a repetitive cycle of labor’s alienation and disappearance.<sup>3</sup>

The Panicharams aren’t just making any commodity; they’re producing gold – the king of commodities, or what Marx described as “a universal measure of value.”<sup>4</sup> As money, gold transforms incommensurable singularities into fungible and commensurable equivalencies, thus playing a critical role in disappearing the commodity’s background.<sup>5</sup> Gold “suppl[ies] commodities with the material for the expression of their values, or [it] represent[s] their values as magnitudes of the same denomination, qualitatively equal and quantitatively comparable.”<sup>6</sup> During this alchemical conversion, the incommensurable background of the object, including most traces of the laborer who made it, are scrubbed from it: “The movement through which this process has been mediated vanishes in its own result, leaving no trace behind.”<sup>7</sup> So if, as Peggy Phelan famously argued, “performance becomes itself through disappearance,” as a performance “Metal” also stages the disappearance of the trace of the laborer from the commodity.<sup>8</sup> As the performance of “Metal” withdraws from the domain of presence, it takes the scene of the Panicharams’ labor with it.

The stipulation that the gold leaf will be consumed for the production of new work in Venice alludes to the movement’s completion as the cycle begins anew.<sup>9</sup> The spectator in Venice is unlikely to find any trace of the Panicharams in the gold leaf once it is on display in the Biennale. If and when the new works featuring the gold leaf are thrust into circulation before being purchased on the market, they will attain the dual life of art within contemporary capitalism, existing simultaneously as aesthetic objects and quantifiable manifestations of suspended capital. The Panicharams, however, will be long forgotten. “Metal” thus sits at the intersection where value, performance, production, reproduction, presence and disappearance clash together, an observation that invites us to revisit the seemingly exhausted question of performance’s ontology.

For a long time, the dominant logic held that performance – and in particular the tradition of body art – eschews commodification and thus occupies an antagonistic position within the capitalist mode of production. As Phelan influentially argued: “Performance

clogs the smooth machinery of reproductive representation necessary to the circulation of capital.”<sup>10</sup> Performance disrupts the very notion of value that is central to the reproduction of capital (which occurs through the reproduction and expansion of value). Performance issues no reproducible object to which exchange value can be attached and from which surplus value can be extracted. Instead, as performance withdraws from presence what it produces is absence, which “indicates the possibility of revaluing that emptiness; this potential revaluation gives performance art its distinctive oppositional edge.”<sup>11</sup> This oppositional edge emerges through a reconceptualization of value altogether: “Performance is the attempt to value that which is nonreproductive, nonmetaphorical.”<sup>12</sup> Thus, as performance disappears from the realm of reproduction and presence, it remains fugitive from and eludes capture by capital’s reproductive cycles.

On a related but different register, performance’s capacity to reorganize dominant conceptions of value has particular significance for minoritarian subjects. Performance may open new possibilities for valuing the lives and practices of people who have been devalued and degraded within capitalism and related formations like white supremacy, colonialism, patriarchy, and heterosexism.<sup>13</sup> As Rosa Luxemburg and Louis Althusser variously demonstrated, the reproduction of capital emerges through a machinery that is by no means “smooth” and is in fact predicated upon internal antagonism and contradiction whereby “crises are an organic phenomenon, inseparable from the capitalist economy.”<sup>14</sup> Minoritarian performance in particular “clogs” the machinery of capital’s reproduction from within this fractured site of the crisis by antagonizing and calling into question the very definition of value on which the reproduction of capital depends. “There occurs in such performances,” writes Fred Moten in a reading of the performance of the black radical tradition, “a revaluation or reconstruction of value.”<sup>15</sup> By defying the economic determinations of value and proliferating other possibilities for value from within the ideological matrix responsible for the reproduction of capitalism, minoritarian performance maintains, reproduces, restores, and returns the value of minoritarian life as life worth valuing.

As much as performance functions as a site of contradiction and antagonisms within capital’s reproduction, we also have to account for the contradictory nature of performance’s mode of reproduction. While for a long time performance remained anathema to the production of monetary value in the age of mechanical reproduction, Vò’s market success is a testament to the fact that capital’s conversion of performance into a site of value production and extraction is underway. Marina Abramović may well have drafted blueprints to accelerate the market’s capacity to transform performance art into a commodity, but this transformation was inevitable.<sup>16</sup> Performance art’s gradual absorption into the market reminds us of Sylvia Federici’s insistence that capital is always seeking out “new” places to convert into sites for the production/extraction of value.<sup>17</sup> Ultimately, the market caught on to performance’s contradictory relationship to reproduction: while performance may withdraw from the realm of reproduction, it is paradoxically, simultaneously, and endlessly reproductive *and* reproducible. In a callous “fuck you” to performance studies’ hopeful insistence that performance art would eschew value by avoiding the reproductive economy, the market now achieves the conversion of performance into a commodity by licensing the right to restage, reproduce, or “reperform” the original event. Performance has a capacity to be restaged and reproduced, albeit with a difference, which is what makes it an unlikely but increasingly valuable commodity for the market.

Since Phelan published her influential argument, performance theorists including José Muñoz, Alex Vazquez, Joseph Roach, Diana Taylor, Dwight Conquergood, and Rebecca Schneider have shown that performance is a reproductive machine.<sup>18</sup> Performance can reanimate the trace of something (or someone) who has disappeared, returning the loss object in some form, even after it has withdrawn from the sphere of representation and presence; performance can be an engine for the reproduction of knowledge and presence through acts of surrogation and transmission; and it can fold time across itself such that the past is carried forward as it reproduced in the present, albeit with critical points of iterative divergence. “The intended substitute [in performance], writes Roach, “either cannot fulfill expectations, creating a deficit, or actually exceeds them, creating a surplus.”<sup>19</sup> Or as Taylor writes, “performances tap into public fantasies and leave a trace, reproducing and at times altering culture repertoires.”<sup>20</sup>

For three hours every day, “Metal” reproduces itself. The Panicharams pound the gold, just as they did the day before, just as Xiu Xiu moves through the series of Stewart’s compositions again and again. There are points of radical fidelity to what happened in the previous days as well as moments of critical divergence. “Metal” also reproduces other elements, such as the missionary’s letter and Piñero’s poem, conjuring lost moments from the past and reproducing them for the spectator’s present. Such reproductions bear a literal and figurative similarity to their original, but with a marked difference. Performance’s mode of reproduction cannot, as Phelan would insist, precisely reproduce a previous performance with fidelity. But rather than say that performance is non-reproductive, I would suggest that performance’s mode of reproduction takes a form that is more akin to the process of biological, rather than mechanical, reproduction. Performance reproduces but with a register of what Hortense Spillers might describe as simultaneous sameness and difference. “Among social bodies,” Spillers writes, the mother “is the only one who can reproduce sameness and difference at once: the child resembles the begetters, ‘borrows’ their tendencies, yet describes its own features of uniqueness.”<sup>21</sup> Registering the resemblance between biological reproduction and the reproduction of performance, we could say, borrowing language from Nicole Loraux, that performance’s mode of reproduction seems to “appropriate the function of the mother for” itself.<sup>22</sup>

There is, as Aliza Shvarts astutely observes, “a submerged connection between the aesthetic and the biological: one that demonstrates how embodied feeling and bodily reproduction condition concepts of representation and deliverance.”<sup>23</sup> Shvarts traces philosophy’s application of a vocabulary “of sexuality and reproduction” to theorize the generative and creative capacities of aesthetics, doing so through a study of a musical performance genre (black metal).<sup>24</sup> Importantly, she describes the relationship between the aesthetic and biological reproduction as “submerged,” which might lead us to ask why performance theory has explored reproduction from a range of vantage points and through a host of (often economistic) metaphors, while the vocabulary of maternal reproduction largely remains outside of the frame of analysis? By appropriating the mother function, performance assumes the capacity to reproduce and extend life long after it has withdrawn from presence, albeit with a difference. This is part of what makes performance so critical to the project of minoritarian survival. Performance allows for the revaluation and extension of minoritarian life in the face of its negation, or as Rebecca Schneider writes, performance “may be ... an act of survival, of keeping alive, *as* passing on (in multiple senses of the

phrase ‘to pass’).”<sup>25</sup> A paradox, then: performance is at once non-reproductive (qua Phelan) and entirely reproductive (qua everyone else), a sterile womb and the womb’s mimic par excellence.

To say this is not to join the gleeful, self-congratulatory chorus enumerating of all the things Peggy Phelan could have been by now if Jacques Lacan hadn’t been her mother.<sup>26</sup> Phelan is right to assert that performance “becomes itself through disappearance ... [and] occurs over a time which will not be repeated.”<sup>27</sup> But like capital, performance has internal contradictions and one of the central antagonisms that constitutes performance’s ontology is the paradoxical simultaneity of its ephemerality (its fugitivity from the sphere of reproduction and withdrawal from presence) and its inherent reproducibility (its capacity to reproduce the presence of that which has been absented or lost). Moten cut through this Gordian knot with his observation that minoritarian performance theorists, from Frederick Douglas to Saidiya Hartman (and we could also include Muñoz and Vazquez on this list), have long demonstrated that “the *conjunction* of reproduction and disappearance is performance’s condition of possibility, its ontology and its mode of production.”<sup>28</sup> That performance reproduces through registers of sameness and difference is what gives performance the power to sustain and reproduce life past the point of death, breaking free from the cycles that reproduce the existing arrangement of things in order to give birth to something new. But when we describe performance as that which reproduces life and gives birth to the new, we are again returned to the question of the missing mother.

Marxist-feminist theorists such as Spivak and Federici rightly insist that a comprehensive theory of capitalism must account for the central, but often elided spheres, of so-called “women’s work” (i.e., performances of biological reproduction and/or domestic labor necessary to the reproduction of laborers).<sup>29</sup> In order to pursue a comprehensive account of capitalist production, Spivak argues that we need to “interpret reproduction within a Marxian problematic” that recognizes that “the possession of a tangible place of production, the womb, [and] situates women as agents in any theory of production.”<sup>30</sup> Such an approach not only reorients our understanding of women’s agential power within the production process, but also opens up a means for going beyond the limits of Marxism: “If the nature and history of alienation, labor, and the production of property are reexamined in terms of women’s work and childbirth, it can lead us to a reading of Marx beyond Marx.”<sup>31</sup> In what follows, I ask what happens when we not only center the reproductive sphere (or the domain of “woman’s work”) in an analysis of the reproduction of capitalism, but also in our analysis of performance’s mode of reproduction. In so doing, I suggest that when performance appropriates the reproductive function of the mother, it opens up an avenue for recovering the lost or absent figure of the mother for both Marxist theory and performance theory (Figure 1).

### **Reproduction and the performance of living labor: “16:32, 26.05, 2009”**

From the 20th of November 2015 to the 6th of March 2016 an ornate, late nineteenth-century French chandelier hung above the center gallery on the sixth floor of the Whitney Museum of Art in New York City. The piece, titled “16:32, 26:05, 2009,” is one of Vö’s most celebrated works, and features one of three chandeliers from the Grand Ballroom of Paris’ Hôtel Majestic. These chandeliers presided over the signing of the



Figure 1. Danh Vĩ, *08:03, 28:05 2009*. Late 19<sup>th</sup> century chandelier. Installation view at Jumex Foundation, Mexico City, 2014. Courtesy of the artist.

peace accords concluding the Vietnam War in 1975. Vĩ purchased them at an auction 30 years later, long after the world forgot their significance as witnesses to this critical moment, naming each for the precise moment (such as May 26<sup>th</sup>, 2009, at 4:32 pm) when it was removed from the ballroom.

Vĩ's family was part of an exodus of approximately two million refugees who left Vietnam by boat in the wake of the Second Indochinese War (a.k.a., the Vietnam War or the American War). But the places that you leave behind never really leave you. Vietnam remains a mark impressed on much of the artist's work as he employs both the autobiographical and the world historical to make, unmake, reproduce, and rethink the history and legacy of Vietnam's colonial encounters with Europe, the United States, and global capitalism. "16:32, 26:05, 2009" employs one of Vĩ's primary aesthetic tactics, drawing on the traditions of the readymade, conceptual art, and performance art in order to reproduce and rematerialize an object's seemingly vanished (or disappeared) background within the scene of the aesthetic encounter. Art critic Michael Newman describes Vĩ's work thus: "In one way or another, all of these objects have been touched by their owners and the places through which they've circulated; or, using a photographic model, they have been touched through their exposure (to an event)."<sup>32</sup> Vĩ's objects come alive before the spectator, dancing in a fashion that is not unlike the ghoulish, dancing table which haunts

*Capital's* first chapter.<sup>33</sup> They perform for the spectator, reanimating and reproducing the traces and specks of lost and elided histories and of the people who touched and made the things on display.

Like "Metal," the title of the work emphasizes the mediating force of labor (the workers who removed chandelier, as much as Võ's) as it transforms one material (a chandelier) into another (a work of art). The curatorial plaque accompanying "16:32, 26:05, 2009" at the Whitney elaborates on the effects of Võ's aesthetic labor thus: "By divorcing the opulent chandelier from its function and historical setting, this object, designed to convey elegance and celebration, holds within it the memory of the difficult moments in global history it has witnessed."<sup>34</sup> If the chandelier is a container of historical memory, the Whitney's curatorial statement unwittingly reproduces the historical amnesia that drives most US American narratives of the Vietnam War by downgrading the war from a humanitarian, political, military, and economic catastrophe of global proportions to a "difficult moment in global history." But staging "16:32, 26:05, 2009" for the Whitney spectator, Võ invites her to reanimate and reproduce the history that once touched this glittering revenant, such that the Vietnam War comes back to life as the chandelier performs this history for her. As this chandelier dances before us, it pushes back against the Western-imperialist amnesiac tendencies that place the war out of sight and out of mind, merely a "difficult moment" to be forgotten. Processed through the mediation of the artist's, museum workers', and spectators' labor, the touch or trace of the history that extended to the chandelier is reproduced in the scene of our encounter with it.

Performance's capacity to reproduce and reanimate the traces of lost life within an object reveals the work of performance as a kind of living labor. Marx argued that during the process of production and circulation the people who make, touch, and possess things extend their lives to them; the things they make and touch, in turn, accumulate this trace. Take his favorite example, a linen coat: "In the production of the coat, human labour-power, in the shape of tailoring, has in actual fact been expended. Human-labour has therefore been accumulated in the coat."<sup>35</sup> Or the moment in the *1844 Manuscripts* when the young Marx conceives of the worker as literally transferring a portion of his or her life force, in the form of labor, to an object that now stands outside the worker as an alien power: "*It means that the life which he has conferred on the object confronts him as something hostile and alien ... The worker puts his life into the object; but now his life no longer belongs to him but to the object.*"<sup>36</sup> Whether we call it the transfer and accumulation of labor power, or the conferral of life, both young and elder Marx agree that in the process of production the worker transfers a part of herself to the thing that she makes.

As the Panicharams pound away at the gold station, the gold leaf is touched by their labor and carries this touch as a trace.<sup>37</sup> The performance of living labor has the capacity to reproduce and reanimate this trace. Flip a light switch and it is as if "16:32, 26:05, 2009" returns back to life. Võ's work seems to appropriate Marx's understanding of living labor as that which "preserves the previous labour materialized in the component parts of capital."<sup>38</sup> If the gold in "Metal" contains the Panicharams' labor in objectified form, when the gold leaf is brought into a relation with living labor during the production of new work in Venice, the life extended to the gold by the Panicharams is preserved, maintained, and even charged with a new vitality. But this also suggests that when objects are not brought into a social relation with living labor, they run the risk of losing the life conferred

to them. Objects need the performance of living labor to maintain and reproduce the trace of the living contained within them.

Marx offers us a picture of such object death in an enigmatic moment in the *Grundrisse* when he imagines a mill without workers: “If, e.g. in time of STAGNATION OF TRADE, etc., the MILLS are shut down, then it can indeed be seen that the machinery rusts and that yarn is useless ballast, and rots, as soon as their relation to living labour ceases.”<sup>39</sup> Though these commodities (the machinery or the yarn) once accumulated living labor in the production process, without living labor to maintain and animate them they are like bodies in a graveyard: they decay, they slip away from the relations and movements of the living and fade quietly into the disintegration of eternal rest. Is Marx’s mill the way we imagine the chandelier, had it been removed from the Hôtel Majestic and sold off in pieces with no one to tell its story? Vō gestures to such a possibility during various iterations of the piece, as in one installation at New York’s Museum of Modern Art where one chandelier was methodically deconstructed and placed across the floor in fragments. Is such object death permanent or can the abandoned chandelier, or instruments in the mill, be returned to a state of animation?

Vō’s chandelier can be reassembled and reanimated as the result of labor’s expenditure and the answer is simple for Marx as well. Living labor realizes, reanimates, and reproduces the vitality of objects. Populated by workers the mill is a place full of life; left behind it is merely a space filled with dead and dying things. But if workers return, they can re-animate these once decaying instruments, breathe new life back into them. Through the performance of living labor, they maintain, revive, and reproduce the portion of life previously transferred to the object in the production process. Living labor congeals in the commodity, but the performance of living labor reanimates and reproduces this trace of life, albeit with a difference.

Thus the production process under capitalism, like performance, seems to appropriate the reproductive function of the mother: reproducing value (the representation of living labor in its objectified form) with registers of both sameness and difference. But where, we might ask, does the actual mother stand in all this? Noting that the scene of (re)production in “Metal” is populated entirely by fathers and sons, it’s not hard to find a trace of the father in Phùng’s calligraphy, just as we can reproduce the trace of the Panicharams in the gold when it reappears in Venice. But where, if anywhere, is the trace of Vō’s mother? (Figure 2).

### **The trace of the mother: “Tombstone for Nguyen Thi Ty”**

During an exhibition titled “Where the Lions Are” at the Kunsthalle Basel in 2009, a sole chandelier (“08:03, 28.05, 2009”) hovered above a massive, austere, white, and nearly empty exhibition space. In the corner of the room, laid flat across the ground, is a gravestone for Vō’s grandmother composed of granite, brown, and wood relief (“Tombstone for Nguyen Thi Ty”). The gravestone mirrors a readymade sculpture also produced and first exhibited in 2009, “OMA TOTEM” (Grandma Totem), which features a black television stacked on top of a mini-refrigerator adorned with a wooden cross, stacked in turn atop a washing machine (Figure 3). It is not lost on us that the bulk of the items represented in both sculptures index the gendered realm of reproductive labor, or domestic labor, which is sometimes referred to as “women’s work.”



Figure 2. Danh Võ, *08:03, 28:05* 2009. Late 19<sup>th</sup> century chandelier. Installation view at Kunsthalle Basel, 2009. Courtesy of the artist.

The objects represented in both sculpture and tombstone were given to Võ's grandmother by the Immigrant Relief Program upon her arrival in Europe. While they don't seem to tell us much about Võ's grandmother, they do tell a story about how she was hailed into proper subjectivity of and for European capitalism through the imposition of the regime of "women's work."<sup>40</sup> Both works thus not only rematerialize a trace of Võ's lost grandmother, but also reproduce the scene of reproductive labor which is all too often missing from accounts of capital's reproduction.

To a point, classical Marxism had no problem admitting that the realm of reproductive labor is conceived of as the realm of "women's work," but it almost entirely failed to account for the role of women's work (and the agential creativity of women) in its theory of capital accumulation and/or the reproduction of capitalism. In *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, Engels suggests that men's fear of women's reproductive powers served as a decisive factor in constituting the original division of labor between men and women.<sup>41</sup> Elaborating on this point, Barbara Johnson notes that, "the concept of sexual difference is fundamental" to the genesis of the modern, capitalist division of labor: "[After] the woman's contribution to biological reproduction could no longer be denied, male dominance had to come up with a new justification for its existence, and it came up with the notion of 'separate spheres.' The potential competition between the



Figure 3. Danh Võ, *Oma Totem* 2009. Phillips television set, Gorenje washing machine, Bomann refrigerator, wooden cross. 220 × 60 × 50 cm. Installation view at “Last Fuck”, gallery Zero, Milan, 2009. Courtesy of the artist.

sexes was to be minimized by assigning the woman to the home and the man to the world.”<sup>42</sup> While Marxist theory could acknowledge this reality, in its classical form it did little to truly address or ameliorate it.

Johnson notes that Marx “acknowledged women’s work (women’s *labor*) as primarily reproductive” but also underlines his insistence that “in the workplace, men and women were equivalent.”<sup>43</sup> By narratively displacing female labor (reproductive and otherwise) from his story about capital’s reproduction, Marx freed himself up to focus on the seemingly ungendered, but still putatively male, realm of production and consumption. Even the “science” of historical materialism made little attempt to account for the vital contributions of (unwaged) labor performed by women within and beyond the domestic sphere, let alone the way women workers were differentially affected as women. In *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, for example, Althusser repeatedly notes that the “family” and the “school” are primary Ideological State Apparatuses responsible for the reproduction of the conditions of production, and thus the reproduction of capitalism, without even

exploring the (stereo)typical work that is performed by women within the family or schools (whether as mothers or teachers).<sup>44</sup> How can this elided history come back to us?

If women's work has been scrubbed from the history of capital's reproduction, performance can function as a means of recovering this absent presence, allowing us to restore the scene of "women's work" to an account and analysis of the reproduction of capital. But this is not without its limits, just as my suggestion that the reproduction of capital and performance appropriates the mother function is not an assertion without problems. By bringing the spectator into the presence of the Panicharams living labor, "Metal" rematerializes the disappeared scene of production. By drawing the spectator into an encounter with the instruments of domestic labor, "Tombstone for Nguyen Thy Ti" and "Oma Totem" recovers and reproduces the elided sphere of reproductive labor. But the fragment of Nguyen's life that is reproduced in this encounter becomes trapped within these coordinates as well, such that the only thing we have of Nguyen to reproduce are the instruments of domestic labor imposed upon her when she arrived in Europe. Nguyen's memory may be reproduced, but with a limiting difference. We can say that much like the child in Spiller's scenario, in the reproduction of capital and performance both products "resemble the begetters, 'borrow' their tendencies, yet describe [their] own features of uniqueness." Here, we need to return to Phelan to ask if this is actually reproduction or the production of something new altogether?

Phelan argues that live performance (perhaps even the live itself) cannot be copied: it "plunges into visibility – in a maniacally charged present – and disappears into memory."<sup>45</sup> The live's withdrawal from presence is permanent and after death Nguyen Thi Ty withdraws from the sphere of presence and is lost for good. By this logic, when the spectator reanimates some spark of her life at the scene of an encounter with her tombstone, whatever memory produces of Nguyen is not and cannot be the faithful reproduction of the loss object. When the live withdraws into memory it recedes into "the realm of invisibility and the unconscious where it eludes regulation and control."<sup>46</sup> For Phelan, the reanimation of the loss object by way of memory (and through performance) is not an act of reproduction, but the production of something else entirely.

In spite of the fact that this may all be true, it's not something that minoritarian subjects can afford to accept. When minoritarian subjects live under the constant threat of annihilation, deportation, displacement, negation, or erasure, our survival depends on our ability to reproduce our losses in the present and carry them with us as we build radically different futures. During the encounter with "Tombstone for Nguyen Thi Ty" or "OMA TOTEM," what spark of Nguyen the spectator is able to reanimate keeps some fragment of her alive in defiance of her death and against a majoritarian sphere that all too often refuses to remember and value lives like hers – the life of a Vietnamese refugee, of a woman of color living in exile. As much as a memorial (like a tombstone) performs memory, it can also be a catalyst for the performance of memory, canceling Nguyen's mortal negation by reproducing her life in the time and space of the spectator's present.

During the Vietnam War, death touched nearly everyone in Vietnam. Approximately one in every 38 Vietnamese died, including Võ's brother, who passed before the family's exodus. Under these annihilating conditions, we simply cannot afford an ideology that assumes the non-reproducibility of life. If we insist that life is extinguished utterly and totally through death (and through the withdrawal from presence), we refuse the possibility that the lives of those we have loved and lost can extend beyond the point of their death to

be reproduced in our present. In other words, we kill them a second time. This is why Muñoz observed queer of color performance's capacity to reproduce a loss object in some form. As he wrote in a description of black queer performances of melancholia, the reproduction and reanimation of lost life that can occur through performance allows us to "take our dead with us to the various battles we must wage in their names – and in our names."<sup>47</sup> To Muñoz, the reproductive nature of performance did not cancel out its ephemerality, impermanence, or withdrawal from presence. It was coexistent with it. He taught us how to live with that contradiction.

Even as performance withdraws from the realm of presence, even as it disappears, it leaves behind ephemera, "all of those things that remain after a performance, a kind of evidence of what has transpired but certainly not the thing itself."<sup>48</sup> Muñoz called for a method of performance scholarship that follows the "traces, glimmers, residues, and specks" that remain in the wake of a performance and in the wake of loss in order to maintain and extend their vitality into the present.<sup>49</sup> In so doing he documented performance's capacity to reproduce minoritarian life even after it has withdrawn from the sphere of the living: "Ephemera includes traces of lived experience and performances of lived experience, maintaining experiential politics and urgencies long after those structures of feeling have been lived."<sup>50</sup> Performance is the means through which the traces of life conferred to ephemera can be reanimated; it is the method through which we reproduce our losses in the present. "Reproduction here is not a metaphor," writes Shvarts, "but a material persistence or sustenance in time: reproduction is the physical process of engaging extended time."<sup>51</sup> Performance's mode of reproduction is what allows us to say the names of the dead, like Nguyen Thi Ty, in a fashion that gives those performative utterances some kind of power (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Danh Võ. *Mother Tongue*. Ink on paper, writing by Phung Vo, installation view of "Mother Tongue," Marian Goodman Gallery, 2013. Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery.

### **Mother Tongue**

Earlier, I gestured to the trace of Vỗ's father in the calligraphy adorning the walls in "Metal" and in "Mother Tongue," the 2013 installation at the Marian Goodman gallery. We find, in the latter, a direct reference to and reproduction of the absent figure of the mother. In the ink on paper calligraphy print from which the exhibition drew its name, the characters are registered in an ornate gothic font. The print is as much a study in the white spaces between and around the letters as it is a representation of the arbitrary relationship between a signifier and signified. The partially indecipherable font resists quick assimilation by a reader's eye. This is amplified as the phrase is condensed into a single word ("MOTHERTORGUE"), which is misspelled, then broken apart and formatted across three lines:

MOTH  
ERTO  
RGUE

The combination of these elements makes it difficult to apprehend the phrase's meaning. The spectator's disorienting encounter with the image may thus subtly reproduce the relationship between the phrase and the man who (re)produced it. It's likely that Phùng did not register the difference between the misplaced "r" and the missing "n" because the vast majority of the calligraphy that he executes in the service of his son's work is done without knowing what the words that he writes means. As the artist describes it: "Lower-class immigrants have greater difficulty assimilating into society. My father barely learned to speak, let alone write, Danish. All Western languages are alien to him. When he writes these letters, he recognizes the alphabet, but understands none of its contents."<sup>52</sup> As a refugee, Phùng had neither the resources, nor time and opportunities, to learn the languages of his adopted continent; he was too busy working in food stalls to keep his family alive. As a result, he writes of a "mother tongue" in a language he can't understand.

As with much of Vỗ's work, "Mother Tongue" is a study in internal contradiction: the father writes the word "mother" in the mother's absence; the word "tongue" ("torgue") refers to linguistic utterance but is registered as written script; Phùng writes a phrase that indexes a first or native language in a language that is not his own and that he does not understand. There is extra significance to this gesture given the fact that the phrase is written in a Latin script, which remains the Vietnamese alphabet to this day after the French colonial authorities imposed their own alphabet on Vietnam during the colonial period. As a result of this colonial trick, Vietnamese is a language that is alienated and divided from itself at the level of the written word. At every point in the image there is a presencing of absence: of the mother, of speech, of Phùng's native language, of the pre-colonial Vietnamese alphabet, and of Vietnam. But what, we might ask, does the mother herself have to do with any of this? Everything, we should reply.

The phrase "mother tongue" refers to more than a child's first language; it gestures to the reproductive labor performed by a mother in the scene of childrearing. As Barbara Johnson writes: "The mother tongue is the child's first language; it is a language taught by the mother."<sup>53</sup> The mother is not only responsible for the reproduction of the laborer, her "product" in the form of the child, but also for the reproduction of language itself.

Johnson offers us a portrait of this process by taking us into the pedagogical scene where the reproduction of language occurs:

A child beginning to speak does not always address anyone. But a mother teaching language to a child consistently speaks to that child even when teaching the child the names of things. Names, in other words, are addressed to the child by the mother-teacher. “What’s that?” she says, constantly checking the lesson. A child comes into language through the mother’s address. It is her job to transform a little animal into a little human being.<sup>54</sup>

We are thus reminded that by bringing the child into language the mother also reproduces the matrix of subjectivity secured in and through language. That is, she makes the child into a “human subject,” bringing her into the language through which he or she will be hailed as a social subject.

If, during the encounter with “Mother Tongue,” the spectator is unable to attach the signifier (“MOTH/ERTO/RGUE” [sic]) with the signified (“mother tongue”), this experience might reproduce in some tiny measure – or at least conjure and gesture to – the fragmenting, ego-dissolving experiences encountered by and imposed upon immigrants, and especially refugees, who live on the outside (or in the break) of a dominant and adopted language. In the United States, the non-English-speaking (and non-native English-speaking) immigrant of color may find her very status as a subject imperiled by her exclusion from English. The non-English-speaking immigrant woman of color is duly exploitable as both a worker and a subject whose body can reproduce more workers. Already subject to exploitation, when it is ascertained that she is not fluent in English, or a native speaker, all too often she is treated as if she were less-than-human: unintelligible if not stupid, distracting if not disposable, a nuisance or curiosity at best, and at worst a threat worthy of scapegoating, exclusion, and extermination.

Within such circumstances there often occurs an inversion in Johnson’s scene of a mother’s linguistic pedagogy, or at least a displacement of its normative assumptions. Where the immigrant mother still hails the child into subjectivity by teaching and bringing the child into language, as an immigrant she may find that the child now becomes the teacher. “What’s that,” the mother asks, constantly depending on the child’s lesson to navigate the world around her. When she faces negation due to her inability to speak the language of her new home, the child’s act of translation becomes the means for reproducing the mother’s presence against the forces of social erasure. As sociologist Hyeyoung Kwon teaches us, the child may become the parent’s translator – an often fragmenting and injurious experience for the children of working-class immigrants of color.<sup>55</sup> As the child mediates and reproduces the mother’s presence through the act of translation, she becomes a representation and reproduction of her mother’s tongue. Vō’s “Mother Tongue” performs to a similar but different effect.

In “Mother Tongue,” Vō restages and reproduces the mundane scene through which the child of immigrants represents and mediates the parent into presence through the act of translation. But “Mother Tongue” largely conjures the mother into presence by referencing and reproducing her absence. In this work a child of refugees represents his mother’s tongue – and by extension the mother – through the performance of artistic mediation (representation *and* translation). The child (Vō) presents a linguistic and figurative representation

of his mother's tongue by way of the print, but the move is complicated by the fact that the image is produced through the mediation of the father's labor, and that it is done in a language that his mother (and father) cannot understand. Incomplete as this reproduction may be, Võ still reproduces some fragment of the mother's missing presence when he performs a gesture towards her absence. As Moten might say, there is "an inevitability of such reproduction even [and especially] in the denial of it."<sup>56</sup>

Just as the spectator may experience a disorienting break between signifier ("MOTH/ERTO/RGUE") and signified ("mother tongue"), one in which the signified (Vietnamese) is altogether absent from the scene, the mother referenced by the word "MOTH/ER" also remains obscure, withdrawn, and absent. It was a father-son collaboration between Danh and Phùng that produced "Mother Tongue" and the mother is no more present in the gallery where the image is presented as she was in the process through which it was produced. But when the image performs for the spectator, the lost mother's presence is in some way reproduced by way of this gesture towards her absence. It remains true that whatever is reproduced of the missing mother in the encounter with "Mother Tongue" is incomplete ephemera and thus what Muñoz would have described as "a kind of evidence of what has transpired [i.e., the life of the mother] but certainly not the [mother herself]."<sup>57</sup> But under the annihilating conditions presented by the nativist, white supremacist, capitalist present, conditions under which the immigrant mother's very being as a subject is threatened with constant elision and erasure, the ability to reproduce some form of her imperiled presence through performance should not be underestimated.

When performance appropriates the reproductive mother function, it becomes a means of maintaining and reproducing the absented presence of the loss object within time and space of the spectator's present. It comes as no surprise that performance thus serves as one of the central means through which subjects living in exile, displacement, and diaspora reproduce the lost homeland.<sup>58</sup> Where "Mother Tongue" conjures the presence of the absent mother through a gesture to her (missing) tongue, or language (Vietnamese), it also conjures the motherland, or Vietnam itself. To say this is to acknowledge the not-unproblematic slippage I've established between mother, mother tongue, and motherland. However, my invocation of "motherland" is meant to refer less to the service imposed upon women's bodies when they are forced to perform as representations of the nation (and in particular of the colonized nation).<sup>59</sup> Instead, just as mother tongue refers to the mother's language, motherland might refer less to a metaphoric positioning of the mother as a stand-in for the lost homeland than as a reference to the fact that this lost home was at one point the mother's land.<sup>60</sup>

"Mother Tongue" is not only the name for the pen and ink drawing, but also the title of the exhibition at the Marian Goodman gallery, which functioned as a performance event in its own right. A spectator came into the gallery through elevators, first walking by the print before entering an exhibition space filled with an array of items, including shipping boxes adorned in gold leaf and Phùng's calligraphy, as well as objects that Võ acquired at auction. Most of these things passed through the hands of U.S. Presidents, military leaders, and diplomats during the Vietnam War era, including especially items that once belonged to Robert S. McNamara, U.S. Secretary of Defense from 1961 to 1968. They range from a pair of chairs that sat in the Kennedy Cabinet room, a letter from a recently widowed Jacqueline Kennedy to McNamara, four pens used to sign appropriation bills that made the Vietnam War possible, and orientalist curios (a Vietnamese carved ivory tusk and a set of African

masks) collected by McNamara. As Sabeth Buchmann writes, “taken as a whole, ‘Mother Tongue’ conveyed the (self-)representation of an era in which political power once again meant dominion over life and death.”<sup>61</sup> When the objects speak to and with each other and the spectator, the history of a bloody war that Roach might call “forgotten but not gone” comes back to life across the pristine white walls of the gallery.<sup>62</sup>

Not unlike the mother of “Mother Tongue,” the necropolitical landscapes of the Vietnam War and the ghosts of Vietnamese people murdered during the war are referenced and reproduced through a gesture to their absence. This is probably most explicit with the staging of “Lot 20: Two Kennedy Administration Cabinet Room Chairs” (2013) (Figure 5). Near the front of the gallery, and cast in soft light from the window to its left, a skeletal, mahogany chair frame faces a white wall. On its right side, the tattered white muslin upholstery that was once affixed to the chair is suspended from another wall. Across the gallery a pile of cotton stuffing and upholstery nails, ripped from the chair, are heaped in a pile on the floor and displayed a few feet from David Wojnarowicz’s iconic “Untitled (Buffalo)” (1988). Elsewhere in the gallery hangs “Lot 20: Autographed letter of a presentation signed by Jacqueline Kennedy” (2013), a handwritten note to McNamara from the recently widowed First Lady. In the note Kennedy discloses her desire “to give you something special of Jack’s – that would mean something to you.” Ultimately she settles on “this chair,” before writing: “You are the only member of this Cabinet who will have the chair he sat in during Jack’s administration.” Lacking only a photograph of the chair gifted to McNamara, the interplay between the chair and Kennedy’s note issues a playful reproduction of Joseph Kosuth’s “One and Three Chairs.” Indeed, the spectator is left to wonder if the vandalized chair in front of her was in fact *the* chair (“this chair”) that Jackie gifted to Robert. In the scene of the performance, it does not matter if it is not. As the spectator moves between the chair and Kennedy’s letter, the two come into conversation with each other. The chair from “Lot 20” comes back to life and dances before the spectator as if it were “this chair,” performing in a fashion that reanimates and reproduces the trace of the lives of Robert, Jackie, and Jack.



Figure 5. Danh Võ. *Lot 20. Two Kennedy Administration Room Chairs* 2013. Cotton, nails. 34.29 × 84.46 × 52.07 cm. Installation view at Marian Goodman Gallery, NY, 2013. Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery.

It's not only the ghosts of American Camelot who come back to life and are reproduced as "Mother Tongue" performs. The ghosts of those whose lives were destroyed and torn apart by the Vietnam War are reanimated as well. Like the "mother" in "Mother Tongue," their presence is reproduced by way of their absence. Appropriating Wojnarowicz's "Untitled (Buffalo)" for "Mother Tongue," Võ seems to offer his most explicit gesture to the absent presence of the sacrificial victims of the war. Wojnarowicz's image photographically appropriates a diorama in the American Museum of National History. That diorama depicts the conclusion of a Native American hunting ritual whereby indigenous hunters drive buffalo off a cliff. "Untitled (Buffalo)" is commonly read as a response to the AIDS crisis, as curator Helen Molesworth does when she describes the photograph as "a remarkable composite of emotional affects, ranging from rage, futility, and desperation to mourning and guilt. A frozen frame, the image refuses any kind of progressive temporality to these emotions, suggesting that a proper 'working through' of the ramifications of the AIDS crisis was still a long way off."<sup>63</sup> But if the photograph raises the specter of queer dead during AIDS, in both the diorama and Wojnarowicz's image the indigenous agents in the scene are held outside of the frame.

"Untitled (Buffalo)" reproduces the colonial trope of the vanished Indian, figuring indigenous subjects as always already gone, permanent loss objects whose violently enforced absence is mobilized to justify the ongoing occupation of Native American land in the United States.<sup>64</sup> We might even place pressure on Wojnarowicz's appropriation of a representation of (absent) indigeneity to make visible the affects of the AIDS crisis. While this identificatory association allows the image to represent clearly that the AIDS crisis is a catastrophe of genocidal proportions, it does so by continuing to disappear the U.S. government's ongoing colonial occupation of native lands and the genocidal treatment of indigenous peoples.<sup>65</sup>

Wojnarowicz appropriates an image about indigeneity to conjure the associative specter of genocide. Võ's appropriation of the "Untitled (Buffalo)" puts it in conversation with another site of colonial occupation (Vietnam) and in so doing reanimates the displaced scene of coloniality within it. When Wojnarowicz's photograph performs in relation to a series of objects owned and possessed by U.S. leaders during the Vietnam War in "Mother Tongue," one starts to sense a resonance between the catastrophic loss of life produced through the ongoing colonization of the United States at "home" and the neo-colonial adventures of the U.S. government and military visited upon the people of Vietnam. But the appropriated photograph of the diorama still calls into the room the catastrophic loss of life during the AIDS crisis. We could thus appropriate Molesworth's reading of Wojnarowicz to say that when "Untitled (Buffalo)" is displayed in "Mother Tongue," the image suggests that a proper "working through" of the ramifications of the AIDS crisis *as well as the US occupation of indigenous land, the Vietnam War, and the connective tissue that binds these three distinct necrospheres together* is still a long way off. But where "Untitled (Buffalo)" suspends the spectator in the moment of catastrophic loss, death, and destruction, "Lot 20: Two Kennedy Administration Cabinet Room Chairs" puts the spectator in the room with an object *after* it has been destroyed and ripped apart.

In a reflection on the exhibition, Michael Taussig accounts for Võ's assembly and destruction of the objects thus: "If we think of the scattered fragments as the result of

deliberate desecration, we must then also consider that far from eliminating the majesty of the monument, what defacement here achieves is its monstrous revitalization.”<sup>66</sup> But when “Mother Tongue” reproduces this history in the spectator’s present, it does so with a critical difference. Destroying the chair, which stands as a memorial to Jack Kennedy’s legacy, revitalizes this legacy in all its monstrosity because the ghosts of the dead return when the trace of Kennedy’s life is revitalized. As Võ performs a symbolic act of violence towards the chair by destroying it, he thus inverts the violence that leaders like Kennedy and McNamara visited upon the lives of ordinary Vietnamese like the Võs.<sup>67</sup> He speaks back to Kennedy and McNamara. Võ’s commodities thus speak and we might even say that they speak in the mother tongue. They address Kennedy, McNamara, and the American spectator with the rage, grief, and desperation of survivors of the Vietnam War, the AIDS crisis, and American imperialism in general. The legions of the dead are reproduced in some fragment or fashion and speak through the mouths of these commodities.

To say that Võ’s commodities speak in the mother tongue is to return to Johnson’s theorization of the scene of maternal linguistic pedagogy where the child, making sound, may address no one but the mother’s speech is constitutive of “*the mother’s address to the child*.”<sup>68</sup> The child without language can’t yet understand her address and as Johnson notes, to some degree we all remain children. We may silence the address of the mother by demanding that she speak from the fantasied position of the ideal mother, which often negates and mutes her actual address.<sup>69</sup> Johnson thus calls for a feminist critical apparatus that asks under what conditions we might hear the address of the mother. We could ask: Can the mother speak? To ask the question playfully this way is to recognize a serious resonance between Johnson’s question and Spivak’s insistence that the critic’s job is to labor to produce conditions under which subaltern subjects can be heard.<sup>70</sup> I want to conclude by considering some of the problems we face when we attempt to listen for the mother’s address as it is reproduced through performance.

### **The mother’s address**

Above, I noted a slippage between mother, mother tongue, and motherland. When I write that Võ’s commodities speak in the mother tongue, I mean to say that Võ stages an articulation of a particular form of queer, Vietnamese postcolonial grief *and* vengeance in the spectators’ encounter with “Mother Tongue.” But it is not to say that this speech act is the voice of the mother herself. Johnson notes that we must learn how to hear the address of the mother, noting that this is a proposition complicated by motherhood as an idealized position that is often imposed upon women (and their bodies) in a fashion that makes their own enunciation and writing of self impossible or illegible. That is, the imposition of the role of mother onto the body of a woman may function as a force of negation: “What the ideal of perfect motherhood excludes for the mother, in any case, is – her life.”<sup>71</sup> This may be one of the reasons that performance theory, or at least the feminist-inflected vein of performance theory in which we groove, has largely avoided the discourse of maternal reproduction in its theorization of performance and reproduction. Indeed, there is a radicality to Phelan’s insistence that performance functions as a mode of representation *without* reproduction, insofar as this opens up a way of being in the world that does not require women, in particular, to submit to the imposition of motherhood and the domain

of coerced reproduction in order to be recognizable as subjects. In other words, within an ontology of performance defined as representation without reproduction, the creative capacities of women are opened up to a range of possibilities that are not recursive to or determined by the female body's capacity for biological reproduction or her (stereo) typical performances of domestic/reproductive labor.

My attempt to issue a theory of performance's mode of reproduction that engages explicitly with the question of "women's work" and the mother should not be read as a means of disrupting Phelan's important and potentially emancipatory project. Rather, I mean to offer a supplementary approach that acknowledges that performance may exist as a form of representation without reproduction at the same time that it is endlessly reproducible. As does capitalism as it reproduces value, when performance appropriates the "mother function" it reproduces loss with simultaneous registers of sameness and difference. This, I have argued, is part of what gives performance a critical function for minoritarian subjects who aim to reproduce lost life within the instance of the present. When performance appropriates the mother function it also offers the possibility of reproduction that is not deterministically tied to a woman's body and that does not determine or limit what a woman's body can do or be by circumscribing it to the realm of biological reproduction. The "mother" that I have been discussing in this essay may well be a biological mother, but he, she, or they may also appropriate the mother function by way of performance, rather than biology. This is one reason that performance has been so critical to queer, and in particular queer of color, survival and emancipation. Performance often functions as a means for giving birth to new worlds and new sets of relationships, expanding, sharing, and reproducing queer and minoritarian life beyond the limits of normative, biological reproduction and kinship.

At the same time, to recognize that motherhood may be an imposition that silences a woman's address is not to dispel the fact that there are also mothers who may or may not be biological women, whose address still cannot be heard within the dominant organization of capitalism *and* patriarchy because of their status *as* mothers. Absented from the scene of production in dominant Marxist accounts of the reproduction of capitalism, or even in a work like "Metal," the mother is concealed from sight. Her voice cannot be heard. If the mother is regularly elided from the scene of reproduction in both Marxist theory and performance theory, performance's appropriation of the reproductive function of the mother can be one means to begin the process of reproducing her presence. Appropriating the mother function, an exhibition like "Mother Tongue" has the capacity to reproduce some trace of the figure of the absent mother in spaces where she is seemingly lost, or disappeared. When we say that "Mother Tongue" stages the address of the mother tongue we are thus not saying that the spectator hears the (or Vō's) mother's actual address. Instead, we are following the traces and glimmers of the mother tongue back to try and find the place where the mother stands and speaks. As Spivak and Spillers ultimately suggest, we must build new spaces into which the mother may enter into presence on her own terms and issue an address that can be heard. Incomplete as its reproductive capacities may be, performance at least offers some means of achieving this difficult task. For nothing's lost forever. This is the secret of performance's mode of reproduction.

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## Notes

1. Marx, *Capital* (1990, vol. 28, 22).
2. Marx, *Capital* (1990, vol. 1, 179).
3. Spivak (1996b, 111).
4. Marx, *Capital* (1990, vol. 1, 188).
5. For Marx, commodities “are of course distinct, possess different properties, are measured in different units, are incommensurable”: *Grundrisse*, 28, 78. But gold undoes the incommensurability of things by reducing them to exchange values, and “bring[ing] them into ... a numerical relationship [by] make[ing] them commensurable:” *ibid.*, 80. He continues: “When a product (or an activity) becomes exchange value, it is not only transformed into a particular quantitative relationship ... it must at the same time be qualitatively transformed, converted into another element, so that both commodities become denominated quantities, in the same unities, thus becoming commensurable”: *ibid.*, 81.
6. *Capital* (1990, vol. 1, 188).
7. *Ibid.*, 187.
8. Phelan (1993, 146).
9. Theoretically, and given that the art market is a slush fund for the financial class, when the new work that features the gold leaf is purchased, it will attain the dual life of art within contemporary capitalism, existing simultaneously as an aesthetic object and a quantifiable manifestation of suspended capital.
10. Phelan (1993, 148).
11. *Ibid.*, 148, 152.
12. *Ibid.*
13. As Hortense Spillers (2003) teaches us, for example, during the emergence of global capitalism black life was stripped of all value *as life* when black people were reduced to flesh, transformed into commodities measurable by exchange value. Theorists from W.E.B. Du Bois (1994) to Achille Mbembe (2003) and Daphne Brooks (2006) have argued that performance is a central means through which enslaved black people articulated other conditions of possibility from within slavery.
14. We want to adjust Phelan's thesis, just slightly, to account for Rosa Luxemburg's insistence that capital's reproductive “machinery” is by no means “smooth” ([1899] 2004, 144): See also: Althusser (2014).
15. Moten (2003, 14).
16. For an important discussion of Abramović and reperformance, see Schneider (2011, 1–31).
17. It's useful here to remember Federici's (2004) lesson about primitive accumulation as the perpetual and ongoing process through which capital seeks out “new” zones and practices to convert into sites for the extraction/production of value.
18. See Muñoz (1996, 10–11): Alex Vazquez elaborates on Muñoz's argument by noting that we often enter into a relationship with the traces of a performance not to follow it back to its originating moment and subject it to total capture, but instead as a means of mobilizing the “healthy and not-knowing quality of liveness that always reminds you: you were not there” in order to reanimate the lost and no-longer-with-us. “Because we were not there, we have to depend upon

whatever ephemera are left behind rather than belabor our lack of access to the actual enactment. We have to listen hard for its trace in the performances to follow ... and operate under the assumption that the live performances of the past announce themselves in the recordings of the present" (Vazquez 2013, 68). For Joseph Roach (1996), Diana Taylor (2003), and Dwight Conquergood (2002), performance reproduces knowledge and experience through embodied practices of surrogation and transmission. As Rebecca Schneider insists: "Reenactment art poses a certain challenge to our long standing thrall, fueled by art-historical analyses of performance, to the notion that live performance disappears by insisting that, to the contrary, the live is a vehicle for recurrence – unruly or flawed or unfaithful to precedence as that recurrence may threaten to be": Schneider (2011, 29).

19. Roach (1996, 2).
20. Taylor (2003, 143).
21. Spillers (2003, 151). There is some resonance here between this and the way Taylor describes "the way performances tap into public fantasies and leave a trace, reproducing and at times altering cultural repertoires": Taylor (2003, 143).
22. Loraux (1993, 132).
23. Shvarts (2014, 205).
24. Ibid., 211.
25. Schneider (2011, 7).
26. Auslander (2008).
27. Phelan (1993, 146).
28. Moten (2003, 5).
29. Federici (2012).
30. Spivak (1996a, 57).
31. Ibid.
32. Newman (2013, 169).
33. Marx (1990, vol. 1, 163–77).
34. "16:32, 26, 05, 2009." Wall plaque at the Whitney Museum of American Art for the exhibition, "Collected by Thea Westreich Wagner and Ethan Wagner." March 4, 2016.
35. Marx (1990, vol. 1, 143).
36. Marx (1964, 108, emphasis added).
37. My theorization of the touch or trace of the worker has been heavily influenced by thinking about this issue alongside Kelly Chung. Chung is writing a dissertation that contends that the aesthetic encounter offers the spectator an aesthetic education in developing a minor sense of the world attuned to sensing the trace black, brown, feminized, and immigrant labor that continues to be a central source for capital accumulation.
38. Marx (1986, 28, 290).
39. Ibid.
40. Newman (2013, 168).
41. Engels (1985).
42. Johnson (2014, 174).
43. Ibid., 175.
44. Althusser (2014).
45. Phelan (1993, 148).
46. Ibid.
47. Muñoz (1999, 74).
48. Muñoz (1996, 10).
49. Ibid.
50. Ibid., 10–11.
51. Shvarts (2014, 217).
52. Danh Vō (2013, 233).
53. Johnson (2003, 66).
54. Ibid.

55. Kwon (2014).
56. Moten (2003, 4).
57. Muñoz (1996, 10).
58. See Vazquez' important meditation on the role of performance in the reproduction of lost lives and worlds within the Cuban diaspora: Vazquez (2013, 203–34).
59. See: Taylor (2003, 79–103).
60. As Johnson notes, “‘Tongue’ means ‘language’ only for certain expressions in English (like ‘mother tongue’), but for ordinary use there is another word: ‘language’”: Johnson (2003, 22).
61. Buchmann (2013, 166).
62. Roach (1996, 31).
63. Molesworth (2012, 43).
64. There is an extent to which we might accuse Wojnarowicz of “playing Indian”, performing an identification with indigeneity that simultaneously justifies the ongoing dispossession and occupation of native space: Deloria (1998).
65. On the genocidal logic of indigenous racialization in the United States, see: Kauanui (2008).
66. Taussig (2013, 183).
67. Where Jacqueline Kennedy mused to McNamara that Jack’s personal effects were “little personal things – so few at any value,” Vō’s purchase of the object reveals how value can be reproduced and valorized through performance. Touched by Jack, Jackie, and Robert, these items appropriated some measure of the value of their lives, warranting their sale by auction. Mediated through Vō’s aesthetic labor and exhibited in a blue-chip gallery, the value increases further. “Mother Tongue” reminds us that as much as performance may “clog” the machinery of capital’s reproduction, it may play an active role in it.
68. Johnson, *Mother Tongues*, 66.
69. Johnson again: “We never stop being a child. Only mothers are supposed to subordinate themselves entirely to the needs of someone else. The fantasy of being fully responded to is a fantasy we all have. That is why we remain so angry at the mother for frustrating that desire – or perhaps even more for fulfilling it”: *ibid.*, 79.
70. Spivak (1996c). See also Spivak (1988).
71. Johnson (2003, 84).

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## Ted Shawn's *Labor Symphony*: aesthetic work and productive performance

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Ted Shawn's all-male modern dance company, Ted Shawn and His Men Dancers, toured extensively throughout the United States from 1933 to 1939 with the explicit goal of making concert dance a legitimate career for men. Shawn trained his dancers and choreographed their performances with careful attention to theme and movement aesthetic, proffering a version of modern dance meant to counter prevailing cultural prohibitions against men dancing. One of the company's early works, *Labor Symphony* (1934), depicts the evolution of work from field to factory while critiquing the equation of the male body with labor power within capitalist economic systems; it also presents itself *as* labor, countering modern preoccupations with bodies enervated through repetitive movement or sedentary work, and with alienation from community through overly individuated tasks. The dance exemplifies Shawn's novel movement aesthetic while expanding notions of productive labor by placing work itself in the context of performance. Emphasizing its status as productive work for men, the four sections of *Labor Symphony* display the Men Dancers' strength, agility, and musculature prominently, exposing the piece as both means and end: it produces both the dance itself and bodies capable of performing it, much as agricultural and manual labor offer both product and a body disciplined to produce it.

**Keywords:** modern dance; Ted Shawn; masculinity; performance; labor

Ted Shawn often opened performances of his all-male modern dance troupe, Ted Shawn and His Men Dancers, with lectures seeking support for his mission: "to promote dancing as a legitimate artistic career for men."<sup>1</sup> Celebrated for his work with Ruth St. Denis and their company Denishawn in the 1910s and 1920s, in the 1930s Shawn devoted himself to opening dance to men through this travelling company and The Shawn School of Dance for Men.<sup>2</sup> When they began touring in 1933, Ted Shawn and His Men Dancers undertook the formidable task of overhauling public opinion regarding the suitability of concert dance as a profession for men. Shawn trained his dancers and choreographed their performances with careful attention to theme and movement aesthetic,

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proffering a version of modern dance meant to counter prevailing cultural prohibitions against men dancing.

Though the first performance of Vaslav Nijinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps* in 1913 offers a compelling anecdote of modern dance's advent, the art's readiest associations during the early twentieth century were with women such as Isadora Duncan, Loie Fuller, Ruth St. Denis, and Martha Graham.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the company's trials prompted Shawn's protestation that "it is only in this western (European-American) civilization, and here only in the last 100 years or so, that dancing has ever been considered in any way more feminine than masculine."<sup>4</sup> Shawn's insistence on men's place in dance history naturalized the company's performances, allowing him to frame their work as the revival of a tradition, rather than an iconoclastic provocation. For Shawn, this history showed that dance had been "largely, and sometimes exclusively, a man's occupation,"<sup>5</sup> and one he endeavored to make possible by expanding notions of work for men in the 1930s United States.

Throughout the company's touring period (1933–39), Shawn sought to strip male bodies on the concert dance stage of historical associations with balletic grace and femininity, resignifying them as strong, athletic, and unassailably masculine.<sup>6</sup> His approach to framing the company's performances involved extensive touring throughout the United States, with occasional sojourns to Canada and Europe, from October through May; frequent performances at Jacob's Pillow, the company's rural compound in Western Massachusetts; and press releases, pre-performance lectures, and extensive program notes. Given the cultural climate, Shawn was understandably careful to frame the public's reception of both his choreography and his mission, directing his critics' interpretations through extravagant prose to ensure his dances, dancers, and aims were understood.<sup>7</sup> His writings (both published and unpublished), and the company's press materials maintain rigidly heteronormative notions of what constitutes properly masculine and feminine actions and movements, and how those should be limited to men and women. Their dances tended to depict and reference sport and work, playing up the dancers' artistry and physicality. One of the company's early works, *Labor Symphony* (1934), depicts the evolution of work from field to factory while critiquing the equation of the male body with labor power within capitalist economic systems; it also presents itself *as* labor, countering modern preoccupations with bodies enervated through repetitive movement or sedentary work, and with alienation from community through overly individuated tasks.

Thus, in order to recreate dance as a manly occupation, Ted Shawn and His Men Dancers presented performances bent on expanding definitions of masculinity, of dance, and of productive labor. Their work was timely, as the interwar years plagued men with crises surrounding the marks through which heterosexual, white men, especially but not exclusively, defined themselves: namely, employment and family. By then, as George Chauncey explains, "men's participation in what they regarded as the male sphere of productive work, their ability to support families on the basis of that work, and, above all, their skill as entrepreneurs and their independence from other men had long been critical to their sense of themselves both as men and as members of the middle class."<sup>8</sup> It was to the Men Dancers' advantage that a strong, able-bodied physique also marked men in this way. Before many occupations relocated workers to the assembly line and executive office, manual labor was associated with strong, agile, virile bodies, and in this way, "the very physicality of workingmen's labor afforded them a seemingly elemental basis for establishing

their manliness.”<sup>9</sup> Sedentary professions, and those requiring automated, repetitive movement were imagined to atrophy male bodies, and, hence, their productive capacities as labor power, creating a cultural preoccupation with the enervation of the male body.<sup>10</sup> The Great Depression heightened this unease around emasculation and debilitated physicality by adding unemployment to the equation, prompting “many men to abandon their faith in the marketplace as certain to confirm their manhood.”<sup>11</sup>

Shortly after the company began touring in 1933, Shawn writes of their relative success to Lucien Price: “Everywhere the response of the audiences warms our hearts. Even when they are pitifully small as to numbers, they are of rare quality, and we give to the handful of people always an extra quality of gratitude in our dancing.”<sup>12</sup> A 1934 review in *Literary Digest*, however, asks whether audiences are ready for the company’s tour:

The reaction from the public was not as hearty as had been desired and expected. There still remain in this country a great many men who look upon the public dancing of other men as an event demanding hoots and jeers. Nothing, of course, could be more silly, but that is how it is, and the element is large enough and numerous enough, to give any exponent and champion of male dancers pause.<sup>13</sup>

The company contended with entrenched prejudice regarding the suitability of dance as worthy and practical work for men. In an interview in *The Men Who Danced*, dancer Barton Mumaw recalls: “There were times when [concert organizers] would come and warn us there were 50 guys out there who are going to break up the show.”<sup>14</sup> Shawn echoes this in a 1934 letter to Lucien Price relating an incident from a performance in Cleveland, Ohio: “A noisy audience assembled, which remained noisy all through the program. The [sic] laughed, talked out loud, whistled and threw pennies on the stage. Nothing like it had ever happened in my whole career . . .”<sup>15</sup> Male modern dancers provoked discomfort by positioning themselves as objects of spectatorship, and by positioning their (sometimes male) audiences as spectators of these bodies, but without the alibi of competitive sports or even a female dance partner to triangulate desire. Traditional ideas about work were also at issue here, as this touring company was engaged in modeling a new profession for its audiences. According to Franko, “The cultural stereotypes that classed emotional behavior as feminine and expressive – emotional – rather than masculine and rational – scientific – were likely the same that disqualified dancing as legitimate work for males.”<sup>16</sup> Definitions of work, labor, and productivity prevalent at the time did not accommodate dance, even when accompanied by a (meager) wage and some modicum of domestic security during a time of great scarcity.

The Men Dancers, however, looked beyond accustomed definitions of production, with their concomitant associations with heteronormative reproduction, and refigured them both upon the concert dance stage and within their homespace, the hallowed ground of Jacob’s Pillow. There, the company trained, rehearsed, and lived, working in service of their art, and producing food and shelter to sustain themselves, in addition to their performances and the bodies specially attuned to execute them through a mixture of traditional dance forms and manual labor. In an article for the *Berkshire Evening Eagle* from 1936, Shawn describes how quotidian activities imparted a particular performance quality to his dances:

We work with pick and shovel, with scythe, axe, two-man saw, and crowbar. Then when we come into the studio to create a Labor Symphony, for instance, it is no mere abstraction – the sweat of these forms of primitive manual labor is on our backs, our muscles are sore with it and our hands calloused with it.<sup>17</sup>

This concrete physical labor served the men's own needs for food, shelter, and fuel; arguably, though, the more important product of their labor was the strength and prowess it built into their bodies, and the verisimilitude this afforded their dances.<sup>18</sup> Life at "The Pillow," where duties, meals, and sometimes sleeping quarters were shared among the company members, fostered cooperation and kinship among them. The Men Dancers' domestic situation rested somewhere between military barracks and queer family compound, and took the dancers "off the grid," changing the nature of their labor and its products.

*Labor Symphony* dramatizes the equation of white masculinity with work and productivity in early twentieth-century America, and the struggle of male dancers for legitimacy in a culture bent on deriding their vocation. The dance exemplifies Shawn's novel movement aesthetic while expanding notions of productive labor by placing work itself in the context of performance. It was equally important, though, that their work be wrested from associations with femininity as it was that their performances be seen as productive work. Stressing its status as productive work for men, the four sections of *Labor Symphony* display the Men Dancers' strength, agility, and musculature prominently, exposing the piece as both means and end: it produces the dance and bodies capable of performing it, much as agricultural and manual labor offer both product and a body disciplined to produce it.<sup>19</sup> The first three sections represent work executed in the fields and forests, and on the sea, highlighting the human activity required to produce food, shelter, and fuel. The final section shifts sharply from human labor to machine labor, which barely required man's intercession, in service of products that remain mysterious to both dancers and audience. The dance, as a whole, reconceptualizes artistic work as labor capable of reviving male bodies enervated and emasculated through sedentary or factory work, or the Depression Era lack thereof.

Shawn's descriptions of his training methods and desired movement quality reveal the extent of his concern regarding criticisms of his work and his company as unmanly. *Labor Symphony* serves not only as example of Shawn's choreographic idiom, but also as illustration of a kind of labor that both confirms and challenges traditional notions of masculinity, honing male bodies while creating an alternative kinship structure built around cooperative work that failed, intentionally, to produce commodities. *Labor Symphony*, through its subject matter and form, fashions products less tangible than those of the work it performs. That is to say, rather than wheat, firewood, seafood, or a mass-produced widget, its products are a new masculine aesthetic within dance, its own performance, and male bodies equipped to enact that performance. The piece itself, as Mark Franko attests, is "a form of skilled (male) labor."<sup>20</sup> Andrew Hewitt, however, contends that dance could either be work, or it could represent work, as "to represent work thematically is to exempt oneself from the traditional obligation to work – to engage in the feminine work of reproduction rather than the masculine work of production."<sup>21</sup> The work of the Men Dancers was, as Shawn explains, "no mere abstraction," however; rather, their performances illuminate the speciousness of Hewitt's claim. Though *Labor Symphony* represents

work, the Men Dancers also performed work through physical labor of training, rehearsing, and performing, as well as through the manual labor necessary to bring out the performance quality Shawn required.

***Labor Symphony: the work of art***

In a pre-performance talk entitled “A Mimetic Approach to the Dance,” Shawn highlights the relationship between the human body and technology in the world of work depicted in *Labor Symphony*. Drawing his audience into the world of the dance, he explains that by the 1930s “almost all man labor has gone by, and machines have taken its place.” Despite the conditions of many modern occupations, the choreographer sought a way of emphasizing the cooperative dynamic between human bodies:

The human body in labor is very beautiful. When a group is working together with good cooperation, a common rhythm brings out efficiency. The group creates a song, and instinctively a pattern is formed. In the dance, labor movements are preserved in human movements.<sup>22</sup>

The dance not only presents types of work largely lost, but also energizes the camaraderie he imagines in non-mechanized work, and which he cultivated in his company. The dancers present this stylized work as their labor. The choreography aligns with Shawn’s avowed aesthetic, playing up the dancers’ strength and force; the dance’s mimetic depictions of work perform the cooperative labor Shawn describes through the very performance of dance as an occupation for men.

Shawn’s frequent pre-performance lectures pre-produce and extensive program notes a reading of the dances for the Men Dancers’ audiences, who were often unfamiliar with the medium. Program notes explain *Labor Symphony*’s structure:

The four movements of this dance, as in true symphonic structure, are danced without pause, the theme of each movement being stated in solo form by Mr. Shawn and immediately developed by the entire ensemble.<sup>23</sup>

Given that Shawn’s choreography in this piece and many others tend toward transparent representations of recognizable activities, these devices served only to reinforce the already apparent subjects of his dances. Thus, Shawn’s primary objective here, as in his other works for the Men Dancers, was to yield a particular body, a reading of that body, and the body’s performance as the “product” of this labor.

In a souvenir program from 1935, Shawn explains each segment of *Labor Symphony*, urging the reader/viewer to recognize the mimetic quality of the dance, and describing the work more so than the movement. This description links the work of “Labor of the Fields” to moments of ritualistic performance, thus creating a rationale for linking dance to strenuous work:<sup>24</sup>

[It] begins with early man’s awakening, his arduous preparation of the soil, the sowing of the seed, and the performance of a magic dance of the tilled earth to insure the fertility of its growth. Then come the reapers with the scythes, then the binders and gatherers of the grain,

and, last of all, the lone gleaner plucking the fields clean of every precious grain. Following this comes the Dance of the Threshing Floor. Outside of archaic Athens was a hard packed, circular space of trodden clay, where at harvest time the young men came to thresh the grain, tramping upon it with their bare feet. This rhythmic work soon took on the character of a ritual in which libations were poured to the gods, and which ended in a wild, drunkenly ecstatic dance. Soon spectators began to come each year, crude wooden benches were set up about the place, and it is through that out of this beginning grew the immortal Attic Theatre.<sup>25</sup>

This abbreviated version of a much longer explanation tells the audience what it will see, and what the dancers' gestures are intended to represent, lest their post-labor ecstatic whirling be confused with an effeminate ecstatic whirling.<sup>26</sup> The program describes the roles of each laborer, he who prepares the soil, as well as "reapers," "binders," "gatherers," and the "gleaner." The dance and its description give a full picture of the process of growing grain and harvesting it. In less obvious relation to the labor depicted, however, Shawn explains the relationship between this and the "ecstatic dance" that celebrates the labor's completion. In this way, the piece defends modern dance as a "return" to an ancient ritual that emerges from traditional, agricultural labor.<sup>27</sup>

The movement in this section proceeds according to Shawn's description. "Labor of the Fields" begins with a soloist rising from his knees and walking sluggishly with deeply bent knees and hunched back around the stage as if tilling soil. He then dips with his left arm into an imaginary bag created by his crooked right arm and scatters invisible seeds across the stage. The dancer drops to the floor and sits in repose with legs crossed in the center of the stage; he rises, takes a series of leaps and then walks off-stage wiping his brow from his exertion. Four dancers take the stage next, holding their hands in fists and twisting from the waist as they act out the scattering of seeds, hunching over and shaking their hands toward the stage. They mime the cutting and bundling of the abundant grain that might fill their arms, rounded and held out away from the body, as they shift weight from one foot to the other in an under curve, take a few steps, and repeat the same simple combination. The movement here, as elsewhere in the piece, seems weighted and arduous, with weighted torsos, limbs, and heads, even though the dancers' burdens are merely imaginary. The eighth dancer gathers these bundles before the men dance in celebration of the work they have done.

All dancers exit between sections, and "Labor of the Forests" begins with a shirtless soloist walking from the wings with hands clasped behind his back. He takes a wide stance, shifts his weight between his feet, and wanders around the stage taking in his surroundings. After he exits, two men emerge and mirror each other's brusque chopping motions as they swing their arms downward. After a few moments, they walk heavily, with hunched backs and rounded arms, to the side of the stage as if dragging something. Eventually all eight men huddle together and move across the stage as if carrying a tree on their backs, bending at the waist with muscles tensed to illustrate the heft of their load and the strength necessary to perform both the act of moving a tree, and its danced representation. Shawn describes this section of the dance in his lecture:

The second is the story of the forest. This is purely abstract. It portrays the forest at night with animals lurking the shadows. Then comes the doom of men destroying a thousand years of

growth. They chop the trees, saw them in logs, cut the smaller branches off and haul them away.<sup>28</sup>

Though far from the “mere abstractions” against which Shawn argues, these movements are abstract insofar as they illustrate rather than carry out the actions Shawn describes here, mimicking the hauling of a log rather than hauling a felled tree across the stage.<sup>29</sup> In these first two sections, the dance portrays work that requires manipulating resources – land and trees – and the movement depicts only what human bodies do in these scenarios.

Shawn provides far less description of the third movement, “Labor of the Seas,” which illustrates “the mighty and eternal pulse of the sea in its rising and falling tides. Fishermen drag their boat down the beach to the water and leap in. A man in the prow casts a net for fish while the others row. Following the successful catch, they return to land, arduously haul the boat back up the sands and tie it up safely against wind and wave.”<sup>30</sup> Once again, Shawn’s narrative is accurate as the eight dancers use their bodies to create the image of a boat.<sup>31</sup> The six men sit side-by-side in three rows as the other two stand at imaginary prow and stern, all leaning forward and backward in time with the rowers’ strokes, creating a sense of the waves’ undulation. In both cases, the bodies show their exertion, using their own muscles to provide the resistance created by a boat moving against a current. Unlike the field and forest sections, “Labor of the Seas” offers a sense of the body as creative, not only in terms of the fruits of its labors, but also regarding the shapes it makes, the images it evokes through its manipulation, and the adaptations of meanings that adhere so readily to it. This section is nonetheless legible as the work of fishermen, but in such a way that the audience’s attention is consistently referred back to the absence of the actual labor through the performance of its purposive movement on the stage.

While “Labor of the Seas” is no less pantomimic than the previous sections with its tossing out of nets and pulling in of the catch, it shows bodies’ capacities to sculpt the space in which such action occurs – here a boat on an ocean. This transitions into the final section, in which the men no longer depict humans at work – imagine what “Mechanized Labor” might have been with men standing still but for the simulated pulling of a lever every 10 seconds – but instead portray the machine they might operate. In this final section, the dancers’ bodies work in concert to construct a machine performing work that barely required human intervention, thus reinscribing human bodies into a process from which they are largely eliminated within factories. Program notes detail the action, which begins with “the Spirit of Metals, in brittle, brilliant, stylized movement.”<sup>32</sup> This spirit appears as a soloist clad in crown and cape, whose left arm lifts from the shoulder and ticks sharply and precisely back down to his side. After his exit, the eight dancers form a “machine with its great strength, its conductor belts, its wheels and pistons, its whirling and increasingly complicated structure, which ultimately grows out of the control of its puny maker, man, and destroys both itself and him.”<sup>33</sup> Again, these framing materials offer an accurate description of the movement in this section, though the choreography here is far more intricate. “Mechanized Labor” stands in stark contrast to the other three sections of the piece, as it presents the men as parts of a machine performing labor rather than as humans undertaking a particular type of labor with the assistance of techniques and tools.

All fluidity leaves the dancers' gestures as the men move stiffly into formations that easily reference the rush of a locomotive, the ticking of clocks, the intertwined spinning of gears, the opening and closing of a zipper's teeth. The eight men separate into a center group of six, while the other two stand on either side of them spinning rapidly in place. The middle six work as a unit throughout the remainder of the piece while the two dancers on the sides mirror each other's movement, the two groups performing different functions within the machine they represent. For instance, when this formation is first employed, the six dancers remain linked at the waist while the other two dancers spin with bent elbows and fists placed at their hips. As the music shifts, the six in the center stand shoulder to shoulder and continue moving in a tighter circle, while the two dancers at the side switch their rotations to clockwise. The result resembles a central mechanism and two fans at the sides. The dancers move with locked joints at the wrists and elbows, and tightly clenched fists. The fists the men so consistently hold throughout the "Mechanized Labor" not only contribute to a strong, stiff movement quality, but also help to, as Ramsay Burt notes, "pump up the muscles in their arms and torsos"<sup>34</sup> calling further attention to the dancers' athleticism and physical prowess.

The piece culminates as the two dancers at the sides move upstage and raise and lower their straight, open arms. The six dancers move back into a circle with their hands linked, maintaining the shape of the machine through the exertion of their finely tuned bodies. Their arms remain straight as they rise and fall, maintaining the motif of the other two dancers, before bending forward, spinning faster, stretching their arms long until the bonds formed by their hands break apart. All eight dancers then whirl and jump wildly before throwing their bodies to the floor, manipulating them into oddly contorted, angular positions, mimicking the sharp shards of a broken machine.

Mark Franko reads the final moments of "Mechanized Labor," with "dancers scattered across the floor like disparate and dysfunctional parts of a broken mechanism," as emblematic of "the loss of human and homosocial community" when comparing modern work to the more cooperative types that preceded it.<sup>35</sup> Franko finds a recapitulation of alienating labor practices in this section of the dance; however, his assessment does not account for the degree to which, as Shawn so wanted his audiences to believe, the Men Dancers perform work in these moments, and enact this cooperative spirit in order to do so. They perform labor in the dual sense that they dance a choreographed representation of four kinds of work, and that their dance is also professional work, but done in service of expanding the role of men in modern dance, and for the continued benefits (training, room and board, performance opportunities) bestowed upon company members.

### **Working out: dance training, manual labor, and a masculine aesthetic**

The mechanized labor depicted in *Labor Symphony's* final movement was inspired by precisely the kind of labor Shawn saw as enervating the bodies of male workers as they factored into the production of commodities. The dancers' halting mimicry of gears and cogs bears the influence of technologies centered around increasing productivity in various professions by incrementalizing physical movements and tethering them to quotas and goals such as Henry Ford's assembly line, Frederick Taylor's concept of scientific management, and Frank and Lillian Gilbreth's time-motion studies. This preoccupation

with efficiency and bodies' capacities as labor power evolved alongside physical culture, which held that human bodies could be "optimized" through "technological reformation."<sup>36</sup> Strenuous exercise became at once a means of refining the body and affirming masculinity, as George Chauncey highlights:

Theodore Roosevelt was the most famous advocate of the 'strenuous life' of muscularity, rough sports, prizefighting, and hunting as an antidote to the overcivilization of American men ... Rough sports became popular on college campuses, endorsed by educators and students alike as the optimal way to build character. Prizefighters, cowboys, soldiers, and sailors became popular heroes, heralded as paragons of virility.<sup>37</sup>

Dancers are notably, though not surprisingly, excluded from this list, all of which offer facades of coherent gender identity as well as inclusion in normatively defined categories of athleticism and ability. Shawn described his mission as "a real crusade, a real battle to establish the legitimacy of dancing for men as a career that any man had a right to choose and to be honored and respected for so choosing." Thus, he took advantage of this renewed interest in developing the body in service of physical ideals, calling dance an "art form for athletes," one that would strengthen men's bodies while also rendering them more physically expressive.<sup>38</sup>

In 1932, Shawn began teaching 500 male students at Springfield College, which graduated more than half the physical education teachers and athletic coaches in the United States. Steadfast in his mission to convince the students and administration of dance's benefits for men, he espoused rigid notions of gender-specific movement. "Dancing Originally Occupation Limited to Men Alone" attempts a rationale for sex-segregated dance education for the male dancer:

Though by temperament and constitution he was thoroughly masculine, being constantly confronted by images of feminine movement, unconsciously there crept into his gestures a feminine quality. For that reason it is important to have men [as teachers and classmates], and to study only those movements and principles of movement that are within the masculine range.<sup>39</sup>

As an instructor, he began to develop his training methods and aesthetic, first stripping his course on dance of methods and even terminology that could be construed as effeminizing his male students.

Shawn based the training on ballet, but "learned that simple descriptive active verbs – *leap*, *turn* – translated better for his class than the French ballet terms such as *ballon* and *pirouette*."<sup>40</sup> The instruction also incorporated traditional athletic movement, like bouncing a ball or rowing a boat, in rhythmic combinations.<sup>41</sup> According to Shawn scholar Betty Poindexter, students began the course "harbor[ing] the usual prejudices of the day concerning dance as an effeminate, light, and inappropriate activity for men." In order to avoid stigmatizing the course, Shawn asked that it be made compulsory; he taught without pay in exchange for the avowed support of Springfield's faculty.<sup>42</sup>

Over the semester, students came to appreciate the athleticism and technique required to execute dance movement properly. Students agreed – universally, as Shawn reported – that the training was physically strenuous and a worthy endeavor for men. End of semester

reviews, again according to Shawn, show that 100 per cent of the students agreed that “they now possessed a deep respect for the art of dance,” that “dance was a legitimate and valuable masculine activity and that it should be included in every physical education program for men,” and finally that “they had found in dance a definite and concrete bridging of the gap between academic instruction and physical education programs.”<sup>43</sup>

Given Shawn’s desire to train dancers in accord with his vision of masculine movement, the physical-education training program at Springfield provided an excellent pool of potential company members.<sup>44</sup> As Michael Gard notes, the choreographer chose “particular kinds of male bodies” (Caucasian, well-muscled, agile) to be in his company, and emphasized the “athleticism of his dancers and his choreography” while “taking pains to explicitly associate them with sport.”<sup>45</sup> In an interview from the fiftieth anniversary celebration of the formation of Ted Shawn and [H]is Men Dancers, former Men Dancer Frank Overlees explains that Shawn wanted “non-dancer types. In other words, he didn’t want ex-dancers from other companies who had preconceived ideas or bad habits.”<sup>46</sup> It was more important to the choreographer that the performers appear virile than that they be trained, or even particularly adept, dancers. During his time in the company, Overlees reports having “felt like a dancer,” but claims he “was a lousy one ... by any standards you want to put forth.” He also recalls that the others, aside from Barton Mumaw, had similarly rudimentary technique.<sup>47</sup>

At Jacob’s Pillow, Shawn devised a training regime geared toward molding his dancers’ bodies in light of his specific movement aesthetic. He divided the men’s days into segments of traditional dance training, manual labor, and intellectual training. Overlees recalls: “We went to the barre every morning and we did ballet-type things. Even though much of our work was not ballet ... that’s what we used as training. It was muscular, it was coordination, it was the whole bit.”<sup>48</sup> Though this traditional training was necessary to cultivate the dancers’ technique, Shawn also sought to develop their musculature and muscle memory through manual labor and domestic work, especially during the company’s non-touring months (generally May through October) at Jacob’s Pillow. The daily chores required of the dancers in order to make the woodland compound livable drew together the pioneer spirit with domestic activities in a way that conflated cultural anxieties and desires around masculinity. A program from 1935 details life at “The Pillow:”

Except the cooking all the work on the place is done by Shawn and the boys. Last summer every one spent many of the hours not used in the studio, building a swimming pool in a little rocky hollow. There is wood to cut, the kitchen garden to be cared for and a dozen other chores.<sup>49</sup>

The company’s quotidian activities functioned as much in service of their movement quality and muscle development as they did to create a homespace.

Shawn’s descriptions of appropriately masculine gestures are predictably conservative, to his thinking:

The dancer has one fixed limitation that must be faced; the human body is the instrument and medium of the dancer and human dancers are either male or female. Therefore the male body should move within range that is definitely masculine and the female body within the female range.<sup>50</sup>

Regarding the specific ways in which men's body parts should move, he asserts "the male arm movement is a movement of the arm as a whole, from the shoulder, with very little use of the elbow or wrist, except as a flexibility in the movement of the arm as a whole."<sup>51</sup> Julia Foulkes explains Shawn's preoccupation with strong versus limp wrists in his descriptions of dance as "another attempt to disassociate male dancers from this sign of homosexuality."<sup>52</sup> Shawn also advocates similarly rigid motion for other joints, calling for "very little bending of the knee" and hips that "are most of the time locked and straight." The movement quality resulting from such movement is "positive, aggressive, combative, forceful, definite, and explicit."<sup>53</sup> Shawn naturalizes this movement, claiming its evolution out of the accustomed movements of previous generations such that "the executive man of today, in his office, still inherits movement impulses from forefathers who wielded scythe, axe, plough, oars, etc."<sup>54</sup> Shawn's choreography, particularly in *Labor Symphony*, provides an outlet for those "movement impulses," activating the muscles they require rather than allowing them to atrophy, but within the context of a performance in which dancers embody and constitute the products of their labor.

Even as he worked to change perceptions about dance as a career for men, Shawn maintained a realistic sense of audience expectations. According to Frank Overlees, Shawn leveled with the company about "ha[ving] a hard row to hoe to sell to the American public on the idea that you could be a normal, heterogeneous [sic] type of man, and then go out into this concert field of barefoot, pansy dancers."<sup>55</sup> In order to counteract these stereotypes, Shawn's choreography emphasizes strength, athleticism, and power, transporting a corporeal aesthetic out of the physical culture craze and onto the concert dance stage. Shawn wanted "to show that you could be a man, you could be macho, you could be virile, you could be a dancer," and choreographed work that capitalized on the finely honed physiques of his company members.<sup>56</sup> *Labor Symphony* attends explicitly to the expenditure of human labor, representing typical work activities in an unusual venue. By placing working male bodies in a performance context, the piece affirms the dancers' manliness while maintaining the products of their labor – their bodies and art – primarily for their own benefit.

### A company of men

Dance Studies scholars have tended toward readings of *Labor Symphony* that at once acknowledge the queer dimensions of the company's lifestyle and work while also arguing for its presentation of what Ramsay Burt calls a "white, masculine sociality in a way that was entirely in accord with muscular Christian propriety."<sup>57</sup> Susan Foster describes the company's concerts as emphasizing a "vision of virile, nonsexual, physical accomplishment" as dancers maintain distance, seldom touching or assisting each other, all of this in service of upholding an image of straight, heteronormative masculinity.<sup>58</sup> Despite disparate assessments of the piece, critics concur regarding the dance's condemnation of mechanized work in its final section, in which the dancers depict a machine's demise, and argue that it alienates, dehumanizes, and commodifies the dancers' bodies through this breakdown and its spectacle.

Though Shawn wanted dance to be "work," the work his dancers perform in *Labor Symphony* is radically antiproduktive in a traditional sense. In this case, there is neither a tangible product, nor a product with use-value. The company's work exceeds Marxian

alienating contexts in which “labour is *external* to the worker, i.e., it does not belong to his essential being,” and in which “he does not affirm himself but denies himself, does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind.”<sup>59</sup> Shawn recognized in his dancers, and in men more generally, a “need for a satisfactory emotional and spiritual activity” and saw “the dance” and the training regime he constructed around it as “realiz[ing] the fulfillment of this need.”<sup>60</sup>

Ted Shawn and His Men Dancers were plagued by difficulties financial, practical, and physical; alienated labor, however, was not their shared plight. Rather, their jobs as members of this particular dance company placed them firmly within an intentional community of performers. *Labor Symphony* accomplishes Shawn’s professed goals of creating a dance form that brings the particular strengths of male bodies to the fore, and of choreographing narratives around traditionally male activities. The performance, and Shawn’s training regime organized around life at Jacob’s Pillow, illustrates a Depression-era self-sufficiency that ascribes to masculinist ideals of rugged individualism, while also challenging capitalist imperatives for men to produce commodities for exchange. While *Labor Symphony* depicts stylized versions of quotidian labor, it produces neither more nor less than ephemeral performances of dance, bodies trained to create them, and a sense of the dancer’s unique labor. These products work in concert to create a version of dance for men that at once reiterated and revised norms surrounding masculinity and productivity in the 1930s.

### Note on contributor

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### Notes

1. Shawn, “Program, 1938” in Shawn (1935); Foulkes (2002, 83), explains that the company toured actively from 1933–40, offering 1250 performances in 750 cities in the United States, Canada, and England. Foster (2001, 161) notes that though they often performed at small venues and colleges, the company eventually played celebrated venues including Carnegie Hall and the Brooklyn Academy of Music.
2. While studying to become a Methodist minister at the University of Denver, Shawn contracted diphtheria and was given too much antitoxin, which resulted in paralysis. His physician recommended that he study dance in order to restore his body and retrain his muscles, and he began to study ballet and ballroom dance in 1910. His dance work eventually led him to Ruth St. Denis, whom he married in 1914, and with whom he directed the famed Denishawn Company from 1915 to 1931, when the two separated, though without ever legally divorcing. After Denishawn disbanded in 1931, Shawn attempted to tour with a short-lived all-male dance troupe, but after their tour was cancelled, he turned his attention to expanding dance education for men. He taught at Springfield College during the 1932–3 academic year, and formed the Men Dancers in 1933. This course led to the formation of Ted Shawn and His Men Dancers, an all-male company that toured actively from 1933–40. For a full narrative of this period, see Maynard (1965, 92) and Shawn (1960).

3. Ramsay Burt (2007) offers a concise and cogent discussion of early twentieth-century modern dance, and of ballet slightly earlier, as dominated by women who were integral to the process of making the work of their male contemporaries visible in his introduction to the second edition of *The Male Dancer: Bodies, Spectacle, and Sexualities*.
4. Shawn, "Dancing Originally Occupation Limited to Men Alone."
5. Shawn, "Dancing Originally Occupation Limited to Men Alone."
6. The emphasis on athleticism and strength as mutually exclusive of homosexuality and emasculation persist in the twenty-first century dance discourses, perhaps most notably in ballet: see Fisher (2009, 31–48).
7. Susan Foster explains how "frames," including descriptions of a dance and the images included in announcements and newspapers, on posters, etc., guide an audience's interpretation. This "framing" continues in the theater, by virtue of its style and the proximity of viewer to performer; programs and program notes as well as the beginnings and endings of performances and the dancers' gazes function similarly. All of this "arouse[s] in the viewer a set of expectations about the event: that it will be formal or familiar; sacred or playful; virtuoso, athletic, or soul-searching; classical, modern, or postmodern." Foster (1988, 59–65).
8. Chauncey (1994, 111).
9. Chauncey (1994, 112).
10. For a compelling argument regarding the fear of endemic physical fatigue in the early twentieth century, see Rabinbach (1990).
11. Kimmel (2011, 204).
12. Ted Shawn, to Lucien Price, Columbia, SC, November 21, 1933.
13. Untitled Review, *Literary Digest*, 27 October 1934.
14. *The Men Who Danced*, directed by Ron Honsa. VHS. Hightstown, NJ: Dance Horizons Video, 1990.
15. Ted Shawn to Lucien Price, Cleveland, OH, April 21, 1934.
16. Franko (2002, 46).
17. Hewitt (2005, 241 n. 29).
18. Marx (1978, 307): "A thing can be a use-value, without having value. This is the case whenever its utility to man is not due to labour. Such are air, virgin soil, natural meadows, &c. A thing can be useful, and the product of human labour, without being a commodity. Whoever directly satisfies his wants with the produce of his own labour, creates, indeed, use-values, but no commodities."
19. *Labor Symphony* has not often been revived. The archive at Jacob's Pillow holds a DVD transfer of a film recording of the piece from the 1930s, with the original piano score restored by its composer Jess Meeker. In it, the stage is free of any set pieces. The piece creates readable representations of each section's eponymous labors. Clips of the piece also appear in *The Men Who Danced*.
20. Franko (2002, 44).
21. Hewitt (2005, 152).
22. Shawn, "The Mimetic Approach to the Dance."
23. Shawn, "1935 Program," in Shawn (1935).
24. Terry (1976, 72) cites Denishawn's *The Tillers of the Soil* (1916) as "very probably the first dance ever created on the theme of the labors of Men."
25. Shawn, "The Mimetic Approach to the Dance."
26. "The Mimetic Approach to the Dance" phrases the narrative differently: "The soil is most primitive. It is organized by tilling, plowing, sowing and a magic dance in which the laborer believes that the higher he can jump the higher the corn will grow. Then follows the harvesting, cutting, staking, gleaning and the threshing. In Athens, the threshing floor was a circular place where the men in stamping on the corn developed a rhythm. This produced a supernatural condition of emotional movement. They began to believe that God appeared to them. People started coming so they put in benches. Finally the rows had to be elevated, and thus the Greek theater and drama was developed. Of course, this is only the imagined reliving of the dance."

27. In "Dancing Originally Occupation Limited to Men," Shawn argues, "it is only in this western (European-American) civilization, and here only in the last 100 years or so, that dancing has ever been considered in any way more feminine than masculine."
28. Shawn, "The Mimetic Approach to the Dance."
29. The program notes offer a more detailed narrative for this section: "Labor of the Forests" is described as beginning "with the spirit of tall trees and deep forests where the little wild things pass their furtive, hunted lives; then the coming of man with his need of trees for shelter, and the animals for food and clothing. A pair of axemen enter, chop down a tree, and as they start trimming the branches, two others come to sawn the trunk into lengths. One of the axemen meantime has killed a small animal with a stone and has called his companion and the saw-men to see it. They are interrupted by a demand for help from the men with the chain, and they all join in dragging the log off." Shawn, "Program Number Two" in Shawn (1935).
30. Shawn, "Program Number Two" in Shawn (1935).
31. The pre-performance lecture offers far less description, boiling this section down to simplest form: "The sea is also abstract. It shows movement in the human labors of launching the boat, rowing, casting the net and finally beaching." Shawn, "The Mimetic Approach to the Dance."
32. Shawn, "Program Number Two" in Shawn (1935).
33. Ibid. Shawn, "The Mimetic Approach to the Dance" simplifies this narrative down to "express [ing] the use to which metals are put. It is the dance of the dynamo which generates speed until finally the machine gets away from the operators and explodes."
34. Burt (2007, 95).
35. Franko (2002, 44).
36. Armstrong (1998, 106).
37. Chauncey (1994, 113).
38. Shawn, "Dance and Its Connection with Physical Education."
39. Shawn, "Dancing Originally Occupation Limited to Men Alone."
40. Foulkes (2001, 117).
41. Maynard (1965, 92).
42. Betty Poindexter did much of her dissertation research at Jacob's Pillow under Shawn's watchful eye. She was given a great deal of archival material with which to work in the hope that she would produce a comprehensive, but authorized, history of the company and its founder. Poindexter (n.d.).
43. Poindexter (n.d.).
44. Shawn occasionally approached men in other situations as well. Former Men Dancer Frank Overlees reports having met Shawn in Cape Cod, Massachusetts, in 1932 due to Shawn's impression of Overlees' "virility." Frank Overlees, Interview, 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Jacob's Pillow, 1982. DVD. Jacob's Pillow Archive. Transcribed November 4, 2013.
45. Gard (2006, 60).
46. Ibid.
47. Ibid.
48. Ibid.
49. Shawn, "Program, 1935" in Shawn (1935).
50. Shawn, "Dancing Originally Occupation Limited to Men."
51. Shawn, "Dancing for Men."
52. Foulkes (2002, 89).
53. Shawn, "Dancing for Men."
54. Shawn, "Dancing Occupation Originally Limited to Men Alone."
55. Overlees' inflection and facial expressions in this segment of the interview make it evident that he is imparting the prevailing mindset in the 1930s regarding men and concert dance, and not one that he shares. Overlees, Interview.
56. Overlees, Interview.

57. Burt (2007, 96).
58. Foster (2001, 163).
59. Marx (1978, 74).
60. Shawn, "Program, 1938," in Shawn (1935).

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## Collective head

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A chance encounter between Lygia Clark and Masao Miyoshi offers an occasion for some reflection on the nature of the city, on Marx's formulations regarding wealth, and the specific modes of wealth that accrue to the kinds of insurgent performances that were the object of José Muñoz's study.

**Keywords:** Lygia Clark; Masao Miyoshi; José Muñoz; wealth

With its coming together in the city, the commune possesses an economic existence as such; the city's mere *presence*, as such, distinguishes it from a mere multiplicity of independent houses. The whole, here, consists not merely of its parts. It is a kind of independent organism. Among the Germanic tribes, where the individual family chiefs settled in the forests, long distances apart, the commune exists, already from *outward* observation, only in the periodic gathering-together [*Vereinigung*] of the commune members, although their unity-*in-itself* is posited in their ancestry, language, common past and history, etc. The *commune* thus appears as a *coming-together* [*Vereinigung*], not as a *being-together* [*Verein*]; as a unification made up of independent subjects, landed proprietors, and not as a unity. The commune therefore does not in fact exist as a *state* or *political body*, as in classical antiquity, because it does not exist as a *city* ... The commune is neither the substance of which the individual appears as a mere accident; nor is it a generality with a *being and unity* as such [*seiende Einheit*] either in the mind and in the existence of the city and of its civic needs as distinct from those of the individual, or in its civic land and soil as its particular presence as distinct from the particular economic presence of the commune member; rather, the commune, on the one side, is presupposed in-itself prior to the individual proprietors as a communality of language, blood, etc., but it exists as a presence, on the other hand, only in its *real assembly* for communal purposes; and to the extent that it has a particular economic existence in the hunting and grazing lands for communal use, it is so used by each individual proprietor as such, not as representative of the state (as in Rome); it is really the common property of the individual proprietors, not of the union of these proprietors endowed with an existence separate from themselves, the city itself. ... Now, wealth is on one side a thing, realized in things, material products, which a human being confronts as subject; on the other side, as value, wealth is merely command over alien labour not with the aim of ruling, but with the aim of private consumption, etc. It appears in all forms in the shape of a thing, be it an object or be it a relation mediated through the object, which is external and accidental to the individual. Thus the old view, in which the human being appears as the aim of production, regardless of his limited national, religious, political character, seems to be very lofty when contrasted to the modern world,

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where production appears as the aim of mankind and wealth as the aim of production. In fact, however, when the limited bourgeois form is stripped away, what is wealth other than the universality of individual needs, capacities, pleasures, productive forces, etc., created through universal exchange? The full development of human mastery over the forces of nature, those of so-called nature as well as of humanity's own nature? The absolute working-out of his creative potentialities, with no presupposition other than the previous historic development, which makes this totality of development, i.e. the development of all human powers as such the end in itself, not as measured on a *predetermined* yardstick? Where he does not reproduce himself in one specificity, but produces his totality? Strives not to remain something he has become, but is in the absolute movement of becoming? In bourgeois economics – and in the epoch of production to which it corresponds – this complete working-out of the human content appears as a complete emptying-out, this universal objectification as total alienation, and the tearing-down of all limited, one-sided aims as sacrifice of the human end-in-itself to an external end. This is why the childish world of antiquity appears on one side as loftier. On the other side, it really is loftier in all matters where closed shapes, forms, and given limits are sought for. It is satisfaction from a limited standpoint; while the modern gives no satisfaction; or, where it appears satisfied with itself, it is *vulgar*.

In the hope of renewing the anti-professional profession and professoriate of deviance, where certain sly growls and sweetly devoted cuts of pedagogical irascibility-in-love sound the deepest commitment to insurgent study, let's move in the prolific distinction between the city and the commune that animates these passages from the *Grundrisse*.<sup>1</sup> That distinction allows Marx both to define property (with the serial, locomotivic intensity of a runaway tenor man) and to distinguish it from wealth. Moreover, that distinction's offspring – the difference between personhood and citizenship that grounds Marx's critique of the abstract equivalence of bourgeois subjects (in the delusional isolation of settlement, enclosure, propriety, home), which is nurtured in the appositional rub of personhood and thingliness afforded by a kind of deviance from and in Marx's elucidation of the commodity (its fetish character, its secret, its relation to the very idea of a general equivalent) – is poised to grow into the rough beauty of the "real assembly." We ought not to be able to keep from imagining the real assembly – the gathering of things in the flesh, of fantasy in the hold – as the fecund caress of earth/commune/school/lab/jam/(collective) head, where the performed devotion of calling and responding in an arrangement refuses every enclosure of its resources.

To speak of the thing that is before the city – as the previousness of a rigorously imagined contemporary projection of an insistent, departive turning over of soil and blood and language – is to engage in something that wants to be called sentimentalism while asking you to remember that sentimentalism is the aesthetics (which is interinanimate with the extra-political sociality) of the unfinished project of abolition and reconstruction that is our most enduring legacy of successful, however attenuated, struggle; and that sentimentalism is too often and too easily dismissed by students and devotees of power, especially in its connection to what they dismiss as identity politics (where such dismissals are always hyper-critical of (non-male, non-straight, non-white) identity while courteously leaving politics to its own uncriticized devices. To be interested in the rematerialization of wealth as something outstripping, even as it is constitutive, of limited bourgeois-imperialist forms and modes is to think such re-materialization as an anticolonial complaint for the anarchic, undercommon) permeation borne by what would have been outside, where we

work and work out the poetics of our beautifully ugly feelings, as Thelonious Monk + Sianne Ngai might say. To be interested in this subtensive irruption is to be concerned with what a genuine anti-colonialism might be.

My teacher, Masao Miyoshi, studies and extends this subtensive irruption by way of architecture's vexed instantiations, its mixture of tragedy and utopia, its interinanimation and repression of work/thing/play/image. Operating at the intersection of performance and architecture, at performance's disruption of architecture, its bringing to bear on architecture an outside/r, Professor Miyoshi is concerned with the rupture of restricted economies, those privatized sites of public exclusions in which the naturalized limit, like some retroactively indeterminate wall or door of houses that are imagined to have built themselves, bespeaks a mode of rationality that would posit the externality as something other than either the effect or object or victim of surreptitiously intentional non-intention. Exterior things pierce naturalized economic exclusion, envelopment, and exploitation, thereby initiating the work of abolition and reconstruction: on the one hand, they body forth antagonisms; on the other hand, and deeper still, in discovering them, inventing them, making three- or four-part inventions and interventions in or on them with the outside human voice of city nature, they intimate the general antagonism, the general economy.

Reflecting on the (anti-)aesthetic experience of the immediate peripheries of Taipei, Tokyo/Yokohama, and Seoul, Professor Miyoshi considers the outskirts of these intensely localized communes in capitalism's newly reglobalized space as monuments to an accumulative drive that marks the derivation of the proper from the commune. He also notes that while they are erected with the ironic capitulation of a certain mode of architectural genius, these communities are often characterized by residents and tourists alike as drab, sprawling, unattractive working- and middle-class slums. However (or, perhaps more precisely, therefore), Professor Miyoshi's reflections turn towards the life that is both embedded in and escapes these city edges (as the outside that allows the very constitution of their centers), which is symbolized by the merry playing of children and the everyday work of their elders, something Marx gestures towards in the presupposition of their activity, which is represented as individual property by way of the power that is vested in, and invested by, enclosed commonality and which is, before that, in the double sense of before, the thing that underlies and surrounds enclosure. Professor Miyoshi's complaint, a recording with differences of the beautiful music that emerges from and as assembly's serration, helps to illuminate the city's underconceptual, undercommunal underground and outskirts that Marx (re)produces without discovering, in and as the very essence and emanation of his phrasing. Professor Miyoshi is finely attuned to the collective dissonance and logic of irreducibly economic existence, "the universality of individual needs, capacities, pleasures, productive forces, etc., created through universal exchange" that is persistently *lived* as wealth in the commune, as the project of the project(s) which we wrap around ourselves as a kind of shawl, since we are poor (in spirit).

Professor Miyoshi's attunement takes the form of a question: How do people live in the absence of that infinitely expandable list of "amenities" figured as "necessary"? But one might also put it this way: How do people live in the absence of the attractive? Or one could even ask: How do people live in the absence of any point of attraction? Life, in the very fugitivity of the working and playing that escape whatever might have been

experienced or theorized as its own bare self, turns in this turning, divisive, recollective run of questions, demanding the pivot Professor Miyoshi enacts. Moreover, his veered inquiry is aesthetic, however much it might seem that that aesthetic has been liquidated or overcome or avoided in its constant throwing of itself beyond its categories, as Duke Ellington + Sianne Ngai might say. Implicit in this step/run/fall/dance is something essential to the general structure of complaint. It is a need that will have been inseparable from capacity, pleasure, productive force given in exchange's irreducible sociality, the contrapuntal arrangement of its collective head. That pivot, where life's exhausted beauty initializes the questions concerning its absence that appear to be its antecedents, is this: is there something on the order of a life of attractions, which might be thought in relation to an architecture of attractions, a life and an architecture of attractions in the absence of any point of attraction?

This question assumes the necessity of the aesthetic dimension of anticoloniality. Moreover, its occasion, Professor Miyoshi's occasion, demands that we consider the sentimental pedagogical aesthetics of the curmudgeon, whose enduring message to his students is "Always complain!" and whose critico-celebratory feelings make possible an investigation of the relationship between what some combination of José Gil and Kevin Lynch might call the theoretical image of the city and something Samuel R. Delany intimates as a submerged and negative inscription of its prefigurative gathering on the underside of a mediating surface or lens, (in)sight made (un)available by the motion of light in water.<sup>2</sup> What is this image of the thing that happens when a limited form (the city of attractions and its attendant, etiolated notion of wealth and necessity) is stripped away? Maybe you have to be a curmudgeon to ask questions that bring the world and the city – their geographical delineations and historical divisions – into play by way of the question of the thing, this indexing of the commune and the earth that anticipate and survive the end of the city and the end of the world by placing them under the disarranging pressure of performative study. The thing itself is also brought into play in such questioning. The thing-in-play, in turn, turns toward the question of (the) work, the work in play, the work-in-progress, which, for Professor Miyoshi, leads to the problematic clash, if you will, of two utopias or, more precisely, the eclipse of (a modernist) one by its (postmodern) other. As he writes:

Architectural discourse, like that of city planning, is inescapably utopian. Possibly because a completed building no longer belongs to its architect but rather to its buyers and users, architecture is only fully itself while it is a blueprint under construction and thus still addressing a future condition. This future most preoccupies us during phases of violent cultural change. How can an urban building relate to the changing demands of a city? How can a city respond to its "globalized" economic needs? Such questions occupy a major portion of the architect's and city planner's thoughts. Yet the future of a building and/or a city is necessarily negotiated with the dominant powers, those who manage and administer as well as own and dictate. The dreams of those who organize and direct are increasingly transnational and corporate.<sup>3</sup>

The rejection of modernist utopianism around 1970 was probably unavoidable. In the past two decades in particular, the social contradictions built into bourgeois capitalism were too brutal to contemplate in a single, seamless context. For culture-industry employees, the choice was either to convert these contradictions into disjunctive fragments or to dissolve the materiality of the contradictions into linguistic games. The best example of the former strategy is the sharp division of all knowledge into disciplines and professions so that no one can gain an inkling of totality. Each sector is mandated to develop exclusive terms and methodologies as if it could

successfully seal its autonomy. (*Totalization* is perhaps now the dirtiest word in the academia of industrialized countries.) An example of the latter strategy is a reassertion of linguistic and discursive priority where material obstructions such as poverty, suppression, and resistance are decomposed and erased in abstract blurs and blobs. (Hence, the popularity of terms like *hybridity* and *discourse*.) Both are gestures of surrender and homage to the dominant in the hope that culture employees might be granted a share of the corporate profits. So-called global capitalism is a supremely exclusive version of utopia, to which “intellectuals” ache to belong.

Actually, global economy is merely a maximum use of world resources via maximum exclusion.<sup>4</sup>

For Professor Miyoshi, the eclipse of modernist architectural utopianism is signed by the demise of mass public-housing projects that, no longer an object of planning, have become objects of demolition. The utopian nature of architecture is tied to the utopian nature of city planning, however the utopian is the in-progress, the in-playness of the thing, the (art)work, the planning away of the city into, and which is also enacted by, the real assembly or assemblage that is present outside and underneath the city’s absence. To ask the question concerning that thing is to bring the outside so deep inside that it cuts that opposition until it can’t be seen then cuts where it was. Such questioning engages in a thinking that is something other than the detached contemplation that occurs in detached houses or isolated huts. It is, rather, the anaprojective poetics of the projects and it affects a kind of inhabitation – directed, in this case, toward the problematic of inhabitation, where building, dwelling, and thinking go together in ways that reveal how Heidegger’s most characteristic sound is often, finally and surprisingly, a recording of a specifically Marxian music. This inhabitation is a movement that Miyoshi characterizes as outside architecture. More specifically, he speaks of a rematerialization of architecture that would constitute its genuine eradication, rather than a doing away with its utopian displacements. Part of what’s at stake is that these utopian displacements might very well be the way into a resistance to state power and its conception of private wealth.

I think of a more literal and less cerebral eradication of architecture: to being architecture around to the material context, to the outside space where ordinary workers live and work with little participation in the language, texts, and discourse of architecture.

Modernism – with all of its ills – was at least mindful of those left outside architecture. Urban workers had their housing projects, though ugly, unlivable, and finally useless. Today’s industrial cities eliminate those rational monstrosities and, with them, homes for vast numbers of people. Las Vegas has a steadily increasing population of homeless people, but no one remembers to mention them. In the streets of Kawasaki and Keelung, on the other hand, there are still homes and apartments, however hideous. Whether they are inhabitable or not should not be hastily decided – especially by those who do not live there.

We cannot return to modernism. We do, however, need to think about shelter and workplaces for anyone, anywhere, and indeed, “anywise.” How we live is finally not that important; that we live is ... Perhaps, instead of building guilty conscience into aesthetically, theoretically, intellectually admirable but useless shapes and forms, we might stroll in the streets of Kawasaki, Keelung and Puchon (west of Seoul) and learn how people live in these “filthy” and “uninviting” places. There may be more life there than in architecture’s patronage houses, where the patrons are not always more satisfied or more comfortable than the residents of these streets.<sup>5</sup>

This outside and insovereign place can be thought more literally by way of the theoretical image Professor Miyoshi begins with: that of children playing on the streets, outside the project, outside the dismal house and its anti-social science. They play outside architectural discourse, too, with extreme subcommunal enjoyment. The ones who live and work and play outside the modernist architectural structure are Professor Miyoshi's object here, but there is, deeper still, a rigorous mode of study that animates his words – a project mode that is thoroughly theoretical, intellectual, and, above all, aesthetic, and which is enabled precisely by the curmudgeonly “rejection” of these. Professor Miyoshi recognizes that the city is where life escapes but that recognition is already embedded in a thinking of the undercommons, the (under)commune, against and outside and before the city. He thinks outside the city in the interest of what will have surrounded it just as surely as he wants to think and inhabit an architecture whose rematerialization makes it an architecture outside architecture. Outside as in before, of the attraction against attractions and amenities, of attraction in the supposedly unattractive, whose music is discomposed by the curmudgeon, the outsider, the *metoikos*, the fugitive, the exile, the hermit, the complainer. The attraction of the unattractive moves in another ecology. Where else can that thinking occur now but at the edge of the (image of the) city. How might we persist as a scar at the underedge of the university, which wants to be the economic engine of the urban apparition, which wants to police the apparitional *polis*, which would enclose the essential gift that animates and undermines it? How do we renew the presence that turns the absence of the city and the university inside out? How can we access the breath and (en)lightning that remains of Professor Miyoshi's *destruktive* and devoted inhabitation? These are questions for my friend, José Muñoz.

At bottom, above all, in the heart of it all, on the outskirts of it all, for José queerness is its own deliciously filthy and uninviting utopian project, one whose temporal dimensionality is manifest not only as projection into the future but also as projection of a certain futurity into and onto the present and the past, piercing their previous arrangement and administration. Queerness has a dimension for José but only insofar as it is located in displacement, at sites that are both temporary and shifting, in underground, virtual neighborhoods, ephemeral, disappearing clubs and ordinary, everyday venues broken and reconstructed by extraordinary everynight presences whose traces animate his writing with the sound and feel – as well as the principle – of hope. Like Heidegger, but wholly against Heidegger's grain, José inhabits the convergence of “ecstasy” as spatio-temporal derangement with “existence” as stepping in and out of time. He studies study's performative appearance in and as the social life of the alternative. He knows that sometimes the alternative is lost. That sometimes it has to get lost. That sometimes the alternative is loss. To be or to get lost might be neither to hide nor to disappear. Similarly: to lose, to relinquish or to veer away from – even if within – a given economy of accumulation— José thinks this in relation to or as a certain disruption of property, of propriety, of possession and self-possession, of the modes of subjectivity these engender especially in fucked-up, Locke/d down, America). Inappropriateness such as José's – which is his, and his alone, because it is not his, because he gave it to us from wherever he was and gives it to us from wherever he is – remains undefined by the interplay of regulation and accumulation that it induces.

Consider (which is to say feel, which is to say dig) Kevin Aviance (deviance and essence, the trace of another scent and gest and groove) as José approaches (which is to say dances with, which is to say grounds with) him – accursed share and shard, cracked vessel of essence-in-motion, counterfetish instantiating the critique of possession that only the dispossessed can make. Such consideration isn't easy. In their mutual approach, José and Aviance become something else; something else becomes them and we have to try to get beautiful like that. That beauty is hard, brown, black, black brown, and beige, tinged with the sadness that attends ours, and that keeps us, moving through the ongoing history of brutal enjoyment to get to what survival demands that we enjoy. José says that on the way to that – in the slow, inescapably lowdown path of our escape – we critically rush the impasse of our fetishization, the sociosynaptic (log)jam that keeps us from becoming instruments for one another, which is our destiny. What José knows about Aviance is what we also know about José. If the force of the counterfetish is lost in the Roxy, lost in all the various pragmatisms whose asses José kicked, lost in Marx though he, at least, as Althusser might say, produces the concept that José came to discover; if the “fetish, in its Marxian dimensions, is about occlusion, displacement, concealment and illusion”: then it can also be said to be about loss or to be the lost.<sup>6</sup> The fetish is representation of loss or of the lost. The condition of possibility of this necessary representational function is loss. Heidegger might say that the fetish, or the counterfetishistic property of the fetish, tends toward unconcealment, *aletheia*, truth. He would say that unconcealment has concealment at its heart, which we recognize in the anarepresentational content that is borne, the ephemeral and performative energy that is transmuted and transmitted, when Aviance and José dance their queer, spooky *pas de deux* at a distance. What Marx figures as subjunctive we now know to be actual. This is to say that José neither reads nor interprets the rematerialization of dance; he extends it, becomes part of the ongoing rematerialization that is (its) performance. This is a migrant curve evading straightness and its time. This is the counterfetishistic, redistributive, performative, gesturally perfumative content of José's writing, which theorizes loss as the instantiation of another condition of possibility: the prefigurative supplement of loss that deconstructs and reconstructs identity, that reproduces a personhood at odds with, or radically lost within, the accumulative-possessional drive; the future lost in the present, fugitive of and in the present; our subterranean movement; the shard of light we share.

José – whose irreplaceability is given in that he was movement in collaboration – sheds that light on and with Aviance. They remain as “queer ephemera, transmutation of the performance energy, that also function as a beacon for queer possibility and survival” so we can see ourselves, both descriptively and prescriptively, as the history of abnormative in (ter)vention.<sup>7</sup> We have to see our everynight selves like that everyday, until the party becomes The Party; and though we're not party to this exchange, because we're not, we feel it, because it moves through us when we feel (for) one another. The ones who don't see the gravity of this have never been on, le/t alone under, the ground. Such grounding, such approach, is José, flying. The velocity of his escape remains in (f)light, as what we fight with and for. See, if Aviance and José hip us to the notion that ephemera mark the ongoing production of (a) performance whose origin is always before us, then every vanishing point signals the inevitability of a return, even if it's just in the way we get up tomorrow, even if our loss make us not want to get up, because tomorrow we'll see that the one we

lost has left us something to help us find him. Deeper still, way before the end, the ephemeral counterfetish will either make the bosses beautiful – multiply perspectival, contrapuntally out, in recovery of what’s lost in the stiffness of their stride and minds – or destroy them. Now that Professor Miyoshi and José are, along with Marx, lost and found, improperly dispersed in us, it’s our job, our animated and animative labor, to bear that, to be borne by that, to keep being reborn in that – so we have to keep on playing.

One of Professor Miyoshi’s most important and celebrated works, “A Borderless World? From Colonialism to Transnationalism Over the Decline of the Nation-State” is reprinted in *Documenta X – The Book*.<sup>8</sup> In this reprint his words are juxtaposed with photographs of Lygia Clark’s work or non-work or work-in-progress or performance or thing or play *Cabeça Coletiva* (Collective Head). There is, in particular, what the editors identify as a picture of *Cabeça Coletiva* moving or being moved down a street in Rio de Janeiro in 1976, out of or in withdrawal from Clark’s authorship and control. It’s like a float into which people have entered or, somehow, returned as if in exile from exile; a float like a hat that a group of people wears; a hat like a garden that a bunch of people cultivate; a garden like a living that a congregation serves; a living like an artwork that a curacy disperses. It is work at play in the city on the order of a theoretical image (à la Gil and Delany, on the one hand, Lynch and Fredric Jameson, on the other) of the city that is outside and before the city, the city of displacement now given as the axiomatic primitive of a new ecology, a general economy. It marks attraction in the absence of the attractive, friendship in the absence of the amenity, moving in what Andre Lepecki might call an extension of Clark’s own (non)performative “withdrawal of her body’s presence,” where withdrawal might also be understood – as in Gil and Eleonora Fabião – as complication: body turned through absence into present paradox, secret divulged in secretion.<sup>9</sup> What 40 years earlier in Kansas City they might have called a (collective) head arrangement, moves down the street in Rio as and on the way to what Clark would call an empty fullness, the “*vazio-pleno*,” that anti- or ante-subjective no-thing-ness of the plenum that displaced *carioca* Denise Ferreira da Silva illuminates in her special and general theories of the no-body.<sup>10</sup> In the dispersive, differential gathering of the project, the projective work, the resonant instrument and collective head walking hand in hand in a field of feel, an approach toward a social physics of psychical flesh is practically imagined as an undercommon precedence of the city, before (and up ahead of) the nation-state, its local antecedents and its global residue. Such rematerialized, transportive, anarchitecturally anarranged utopianism constitutes a non-exclusionary urban plan, structured by communicability rather than relation, in acknowledgement of an already given and incalculable wealth.

It turns out that the end of “Outside Architecture” echoes the end of “A Borderless World?”

Los Angeles and New York, Tokyo and Hong Kong, Berlin and London are all teeming with “strange-looking” people. And U.S. academics quite properly study them as a plurality of presences. But before we look distantly at them and give them over to their specialists, we need to know why they are where they are. What are the forces driving them? How do they relate to our everyday life? Who is behind all this drifting?<sup>11</sup>

Now what's the relation between these strange-looking people, these outsiders, these *metoikoi* and the ones who are outside architecture in their own homes, the ones dancing in their collective head, like Lygia Clark or Ornette Coleman or Kevin Aviance? What is the nature of this before of the distant look, a thinking antecedent to detached contemplation? Direct examination is distinguished from distant look, from the distancing of political actuality and the detached contemplation of people in/at/as work-in-play. The before of the distant look is an inhabitation, an assembly, a public thing, that is nothing, finally, if not aesthetic, that is driven by nothing if not the intensity of a whole other payment of attention. Inhabitation, here, is immediately a question of drift. To think those who are outside architecture alongside the "strange-looking" people is to consider the universal exchange of extra-ordinary lives. The question of the architecture, economy, and ecology of our down and out commonality is the song-like question of the earth that is also, and immediately, the question of art to the extent that it is bound not only to the ability to inhabit the differential but irreducible totality but also to deal with the mobile jurisgenerativity of dwelling. The collective head always complains, always sings together; the collective head is coming-together, way on the outskirts of town. To complain is to sing with that communist sound to which Professor Miyoshi and José are attuned and which they amplify and extend insofar as their work is an open installation, the thing you live in and play in and play and wear and are.

When Professor Miyoshi and José encounter one another in the call for the art/work/play/thing of a queer, utopian, futural anarchitecture – not (just) as something sculptural but in/as irreducible presences of improper, impersonative flesh in all its thingliness and earthly inhabitation – he is calling for and also joining a rematerialization of wealth, of what we ought to treasure in what is always here, the future in our present that is beautiful however unheard or unappreciated. He calls for the actuality of what is often feared in artistic presencing; for an architecture of what people outside architecture, outside the house and the city, outside citizenship and subjectivity, outside settlement and sovereignty, do to all of these by living; for an architecture set up to receive aninstrumental, anarchitectural doing, thinging, thinking; for a communal, anarchic, textural environment that is ecological, social, and personal. This is also to call for a necessary reconfiguration of economics – beyond the rapaciously incorporative incorporealities of what Randy Martin calls the "financialization of daily life" – so as no longer imperiously and imperially to exclude, by way of the most violent calculations of forced and rationalized inclusions and in/corporations, externalities (not just unaccounted-for costs but also irreducibly originary material benefits), in their undercommon and erotic indebtedness.<sup>12</sup> It is in the interest of unsettling, of the unsettled who are without interest, that Marx, Miyoshi, and Muñoz walk the resonant bridge between the city and the commune. I once heard Professor Miyoshi speak, with a mixture of understanding and impatience, of Edward Said's need for art, which he understood as a tendency to veer away from the urgent necessity to concentrate on the economic. But José lets us know that attunement to the economic, where the economic is an irreducibly edgy anoriginarity that Marx would call the commune, leads immediately to the aesthetic so that the need for art will manifest itself materially, as the re-materialization of wealth that Marx also calls for by way of his production, if not discovery, of the commune, his undercommon making and joining of the real assembly. What emerges is an aesthetic of material wealth and beauty that also allows discussion of the ugliness by which it is permeated. The aesthetic's improper home is the curmudgeon's inappropriate

office, the bitch's loving fierceness, which is what we should have been treasuring all along. We move, along with Marx, Miyoshi, and Muñoz, in anticipation of rearrangement, in step with anarrangement, as if remotely performing Clark's collective head arrangement, her anoperatic offering of the subrepublican public thing, and Aviance's ongoing project of the broken vessel, his projection of its immanence and emanation, the outside we live (in), our making and joining and renewal of the real assembly.

## Notes

1. Marx (1973, 483, 487).
2. See Gil (1998); Lynch (1960); Delany (1983, 2004).
3. Miyoshi (1996, 44).
4. Miyoshi (1996, 45).
5. Miyoshi (1996, 47).
6. Muñoz (2009, 78).
7. Ibid., 74.
8. Miyoshi (1997, 182–202). Originally published in *Critical Inquiry* 19 (Summer 1993): 726–51.
9. Lepecki (2014, 279). See also Fabião (2014); Bessa (2014).
10. Lepecki (2014, 282). See also Ferreira da Silva (2009).
11. Miyoshi (1997, 202).
12. Martin (2002).

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## Swampwalls: dark matter and the lumpen army of art

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Dominant notions of contemporary art are being overturned not by some radical avant-garde theory or movement, but instead by an “uprising” from within the confines of the “art factory,” as well as by newly embodied instances of informal everyday creativity that high culture has long overlooked. Theorists Negt and Kluge might have described this insurrection as the partial unblocking of a counter-public or proletarian sphere: a realm of fragmented identities and working class fantasy generated in response to the alienating conditions of capitalism. A more specific cultural interpretation suggests this mutiny from within and assault from below is the irrepressible brightening of “creative dark matter:” that marginalized and systematically underdeveloped aggregate of creative productivity, which nonetheless reproduces the material and symbolic economy of high culture. The results are explosive, or at least potentially so as this long, pent-up shadow archive spills out into the once forbidden dwelling place of mainstream law and order and high cultural privilege. Meanwhile, a new wave of socially engaged art is thriving on the margins of the art world. Like an enormous production warehouse this “post-public” creativity is developing sustainable farming, reenacting historical labor demonstrations, providing public services lost to decades of deregulatory economic policy, and initiating local bartering systems and environmental cleanups. Its vitality is something Joseph Beuys could have only dream about. And not surprisingly even this “autonomous” and “Interventionist” art is selectively becoming part of the mainstream culture industry through what Gilles Deleuze describes as an “apparatus of capture.” Nevertheless, one result of this new confrontation reveals this vibrant imaginary “from below” is pushing artistic production, pushing also discourse, pedagogy and cultural institutions into radically re-thinking definitions and possibilities not only involving the possibilities of contemporary avant-garde art practices, but also about the very nature of creativity, democracy, and political agency more broadly.

**Keywords:** art and labor; political art; activist art

For more than 30 years, a close relation of mine worked in the shipping and receiving department of a nonunionized factory in Pennsylvania.<sup>1</sup> Early on in his employment, this relative and several of his coworkers spent their work breaks attaching newspaper clippings, snapshots, spent soda cans, industrial debris, trashed food containers, and similar bits and

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pieces to one wall of the plant. After a few years, the accumulated clutter expanded to include the entire wall. They christened this impromptu collage “Swampwall.” The owner of the factory, an aging sole proprietor in a world of mergers and multinationals, tolerated this workplace diversion until a global corporation bought up the company. Swampwall was swiftly expunged.

This familial relation and his fellow workers were all high-school graduates. They did not attend college; they had never visited an art museum. Notwithstanding the recent popularity of de-skilled slack art and “clutterfuck” – randomly distributed cartoons, sketches, and doodles pinned to white walls, idly piled clumps of ephemera or manufactured goods spread over gallery floors – the messy, collaborative Swampwall frieze was not meant to be “art.” It was instead a silent expression of *non-productivity* that was visible only to those with business in that particular wing of the factory: an uninviting, sweat-soaked warehouse ruled by packing crates, forklifts, and tiers of loading pallets, set far from the tidy cubicles or product showrooms of plant managers.

Swampwall was, in other words, a fantasy of autonomy. It made manifest a desire to direct some small portion of one’s energy as one pleases, without workplace discipline. As Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge insist: “Living labour has, along with the surplus value extracted from it, carried on its own production – within fantasy.”<sup>2</sup> Swampwall might be thought of as a concrete representation of such fantasy, but it also demonstrated the possibility that one could punch in and be “on company time,” while being elsewhere at the same time.

How differently we take stock of this rubbish wall, knowing it was neither the offspring of Arte Povera nor intended for display in a museum or art gallery. This contrast sharpens further if we compare my description of Swampwall to the accolades that celebrated artist Tony Feher receives when he transforms “humble, forgettable materials that he finds – bottles, jars, plastic soda crates ... into work that is rich with human emotion and fragile beauty.”<sup>3</sup> Similar descriptions could be cited regarding the work of other artists who reject technical craft to highlight the unpretentious aesthetic of everyday objects, low-brow styling, and pop culture; or who celebrate the ingenuity of do-it-yourself (DIY) non-artists and amateurs. Art historian Brandon Taylor uses the term “slack art” to describe the way such artists use ephemeral materials and a marked disinterest in skilled craftsmanship to produce extemporaneous installations.<sup>4</sup> For historian John Roberts and artist David Beech, this tendency reveals a “philistine aesthetic” of poorly crafted and often vulgar art, reflecting the distractedness of the audience at a football game or television show.<sup>5</sup> Many professional artists wish to appear ill-trained, and so they de-skill themselves in order to emulate what they think of as informal production. But, simultaneously, a great mass of nonprofessionals is finding it easy to “raise” its standards of craft, thanks to inexpensive digital technology that makes the production of near-professional quality graphics, movies, and music available to anyone with access to a computer.<sup>6</sup> This leads to an unexpected convergence. As Roberts asserts: “The amateur on the ‘way up’ and the professional artist on the ‘way down’ meet under the auspices of deskilling.”<sup>7</sup>

This juncture of formal and informal artistic skills is not surprising to anyone familiar with the way hobbyists and amateurs often approach technique as a time-consuming activity, requiring a great deal of practice and patience to “get it right.” But this is exactly opposite to the way art-school graduates are taught to downplay, discard, or

outsource manual technique, and focus on developing intellectual, organizational, or even curatorial skills instead. Charlie Leadbeater and Paul Miller label this meeting point “the pro-am revolution.”<sup>8</sup> They insist that “we’re witnessing the flowering of bottom-up self-organization, and the crude, all or nothing, categories of professional or amateur will need to be rethought.” However, a different way to think about this emerging sphere of social productivity is not as something entirely new, but as a missing mass or dark matter that has always operated within the shadows of the formal economy. Dark matter invisibly anchors productivity but also occasionally disrupts it, a point I will return to shortly.

Consider the work done by housewives who, in most nations, still feed, clean, and literally reproduce the work force. This seemingly natural type of work appears to fall outside the formal economy. Nevertheless, a recent poll (October 2007) by the Office of National Statistics in England indicates that women’s “unwaged” housework indirectly contributes as much as £739 billion to the British economy annually.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, efforts by feminists to obtain wages for housework are seen as a threat to economic stability, which, in a way, they are. First, to pay for this work would require some sort of redistribution of corporate profits, an unwelcome socialist proposition in a world dominated by neoliberal economic policies (not to mention neoconservative and patriarchal politics, especially in the United States and most Muslim countries). More significantly, to recognize unwaged women’s work as a contribution to the mainstream economy opens up a Pandora’s box. Why only pay for housework? Why not also remunerate sexual reproduction? What about the contribution children and students make as future laborers? How about supporting the nonwork of the unemployed, who serve as a reserve army of labor for the employed? Isn’t each necessary for the other? In fact, the entire range of superfluous people generated by the market would need to be accounted for if informal social production and nonproduction were understood as structurally necessary for a system that benefits only a small portion of the global population.

Unlike the formal economy, this missing mass or dark matter consists of informal systems of exchange; cooperative networks; communal leisure practices; conduits for sharing gossip, fantasy, anger, and resentments; and even the occasional self-organized collective that may or may not be politically motivated. Within this dark universe, services, goods, information, and in some cases outright contraband are duplicated and distributed – sometimes in the form of bartered exchange and occasionally as gifts that circulate freely, thus always moving and benefiting a particular network or informally defined community. All of this is disconnected from, or only partially connected to, the mainstream market. For capitalism to acknowledge this missing mass would require a radical redefinition of the concept of productivity. And that is exactly what some enterprising capitalists are seeking to do.

For neoliberal theorists such as Leadbeater, the materialization of a broadly distributed, creative force is the creative engine driving the new, networked, creative economy. Leadbeater has even urged British universities to become “open-cast mines of the knowledge economy.”<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, business pundit John Howkins’ book on the creative economy argues that “managing creative people will be fundamental to business success in the next century,”<sup>11</sup> and legal scholar Yochai Benkler actually refers to the rising visibility of intangible social production as “the dark matter of our economic production universe.”<sup>12</sup>

Despite these upbeat assessments about what I am calling dark matter, this missing mass is not just a world of cooperation and friendly networking; it is also filled with populist contempt for authority, resistance to selling one's labor as a commodity, and even instances of nationalism, racism, and class resentment. As philosopher C. George Caffentzis put it, there has been recently a "growing realization that non-market exchanges can challenge and disrupt the formal economy, and yet are essential to its existence." That challenge will not be settled cheaply.<sup>13</sup>

Controlling the intrinsic unruliness posed by informal systems of social production was far easier when economists, politicians, business people, and arts administrators all agreed that dark matter either did not exist or was inherently valueless. As this missing mass becomes increasingly illuminated, the danger it poses to entrenched interests within mainstream business, political, and art worlds has generated a brewing crisis of legitimacy. The arbitrary line normally demarcating productive from nonproductive work, or people who participate professionally in making culture from people who do not, is becoming increasingly tenuous, and in some cases it has been erased altogether. Curiously, it is those who lay claim to the management and interpretation of culture – the critics, art historians, collectors, dealers, museums, curators, and arts administrators – who have been the most reluctant to address this phenomenon. Such denial is not baseless. Recognizing the rising wave of social production as bona fide culture requires that the art establishment either adopt an entirely new aesthetic platform, or admit that the normal processes of artistic valorization are arbitrary. Perhaps this explains the popularity of curator and theorist Nicolas Bourriaud, who claims to have discovered that artists are becoming social producers, and has branded his "find" as a radical new art movement?

Needless to say, artists have always engaged in social production, just like other workers do. These new understandings come from people perceiving the process of making or remaking art as a collective process, rather than the isolated work of an individual genius or auteur. As art historian Alan W. Moore explains, when it comes to making art,

Mutual aid is as important as competition. The process of production is continuously or intermittently collective as artists come together in teaching situations and workshops, sharing ideas, techniques and processes.<sup>14</sup>

Therefore, within the folds of dark matter social production, one finds not only informal producers and amateurs, but also a legion of professionally trained artists occupying a limbo-like space that is simultaneously necessary and superfluous to both the fiscal and symbolic economy of high culture.

In economic terms, most professionally trained artists make up what Marx described as a reserve army of unemployed, or perhaps today semi-employed is more accurate. The majority of artists enter the ranks of this cultural infantry the moment they graduate from art schools or universities. Most will never leave its service. These lost souls are what Carol Duncan has called the "glut of art and artists" that makes up the "normal condition of the art market."<sup>15</sup> These hungry lumpen not only compete for the minute rewards doled out by the art world, but they inadvertently prop up the symbolic and fiscal economy of art as they do so. Superfluous artists form an indistinct backdrop against which the small percentages of artists who succeed appear sharply focused. One of the

only comprehensive studies made of visual artists in the United States by the Rand Corporation in 2005 underscores Duncan's observation. The report's key finding states that although the number of artists has greatly increased in recent years, "the hierarchy among artists, always evident, appears to have become increasingly stratified, as have their earnings prospects." While a few "superstars" at the top of this hierarchy "sell their work for hundreds of thousands and occasionally millions of dollars, the vast majority of visual artists often struggle to make a living from the sale of their work, and typically earn a substantial portion of their income from non-arts employment."<sup>16</sup>

Some of these surplus laborers find work in the mega-studios of ultra-successful artists, where they might sand and polish resin-cast sculpture, often for little more than minimum wage. Because of the loss of affordable studio space, many artists are also moving further from the urban centers that remain home to gatekeeper museums, galleries, critics, and curators. Dark matter is like an un-representable shantytown surrounding the municipality of art. Because what the Rand Corporation report does not say is that, unlike in other professional disciplines where individuals spend years (and, in the United States, large sums of money) training to be a professional, the high-art industry as it is now organized must segregate the majority of its qualified participants from visibility by isolating them from anything but a very small share of the overall industries' resources and revenue. This is what Duncan means when she ironically describes the surfeit of artists as "a natural condition." It's only natural if one believes that talent, like gender, or noble birth, determines one's destiny. I am not suggesting that artists' working conditions, especially in developed countries, are comparable to precarious workers in a fast-food chain store or factory. What I mean is that each relatively autonomous economic sphere within capitalism develops its own hierarchies of elite workers and plentiful underlings, and therefore of visibility and invisibility. The art world industry is even more unusual because it locks out most participants from upward mobility or profit sharing, the illusion of which is even found at Walmart or Starbucks. Fortunately, attempts at resisting or even unionizing against this "canvas ceiling" have been initiated since the "great crash" of 2007–8: consider for example groups such as W.A.G.E., Debt Fair, and [bfamfaphd.org](http://bfamfaphd.org).<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, such thinking is how the culture factory represents itself as a top-down process when it is operationally functional only from the bottom up.

Needless to say, artists are far from passive victims in this process of delimitation and segregation. By actively replicating and circulating the critical "buzz" directed towards successful artists and their work, and by subscribing to trade magazines, attending exhibitions and lectures, purchasing art supplies, and informally sharing personal stories and gossip about art stars, dealers, curators, and the like, they provide the symbolic and material revenue for maintaining the art market and its hierarchies. Add to this the thousands of trained artists who literally reproduce the dark-matter workforce by teaching future generations of artists in universities, colleges, and other educational programs. The art world as an aggregate economy successfully manages its own excessively surplus labor force, extracting value from a redundant majority of "failed" artists who in turn apparently acquiesce to this disciplinary arrangement. It is the aggregated labor generated by an over-supply of redundant artists that makes the art economy reproducible and also truly anomalous.<sup>18</sup>

Nevertheless, in the recent past, the value yielded from art world production has been shared more equitably. The period leading out of the last great depression in the United States was one of the few moments when government-funded programs put artists to work producing murals and other public art projects. Something similar took place starting in the mid-1960s through the early 1980s. As artist Martha Rosler has written, ample government funding helped spread cultural equality to many smaller American cities, which then had “highly active art scenes that were not oriented toward making (a lot of money) from art.”<sup>19</sup> This more inclusive “alternative” cultural sphere was made up of artist-run cooperative galleries, small not-for-profit spaces, and even some informally organized artists’ collectives, many with radical social or political agendas. Indeed, this was a moment when experimentation and interdisciplinary collaborations were common between artists and scientists. In the 1960s and 1970s, numerous artists in the United States found at least some level of employment in public projects – some of which were aimed at developing ties to local communities in urban and rural settings.

Increased independence from the established cultural world also coincided with an unprecedented pluralism of artistic styles. As Rosler points out, this was a moment when a less hierarchical, more intellectually porous idea of art emerged, thanks to a combination of significant public funding (compared with today), the influence of liberation struggles by feminists, people of color, and gays, as well as militant factory workers, dissident soldiers, and striking students, and the profusion of splintery political parties generated by Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and the American New Left. Some artists formed their own radically oriented collectives, such as Art Workers Coalition (AWC), Artists Meeting for Cultural Change (AMCC), and Angry Arts. Militant editorial collectives emerged that took advantage of inexpensive offset printing to focus on issues of culture and politics. Publications included *Red Herring*, *The Fox*, *Heresies*, *AntiCatalog*, *Left Curve*, and *Black Phoenix*. Even during the first few years of massive wealth consolidation under Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, it was still common to find artists working in groups with strong political or social programs. Political Art Documentation/Distribution (PAD/D), Group Material, Carnival Knowledge, Artists for Nuclear Disarmament (AND), and, later, Gran Fury and the Guerrilla Girls all emerged in the first half of the 1980s, a time when neoliberal privatization was aggressively dismantling the social-welfare state.<sup>20</sup>

This process has transformed the art world, including its academic divisions, into a super-competitive, entrepreneurial matrix that produces a few winners and many more losers, and where much contemporary art is indistinguishable from other luxury commodities. (The interest hedge-fund operators and other financiers have now taken in buying and selling, flipping, and even bundling contemporary artworks into investment instruments is proof enough of this fact.) Such harsh circumstances have convinced younger artists, and quite a few mature ones, that talent and hard work are not enough to carry one up the sloping sides of the art world pyramid. As a result, painters, sculptors, installation artists, and media-makers show a growing interest in self-marketing and other entrepreneurial techniques. The new enterprise-artist has apparently abandoned any lingering, wistful romanticism to embrace the icy relations of capital. But what became of the power art allegedly held to critically reveal the distance between actual social conditions and an ideal economy? Is it possible that aesthetic detachment has itself been appropriated as an instrument of unfreedom?

In 2000, a well-known contemporary artist paid four Brazilian prostitutes in narcotics in order to tattoo a 160-centimeter-thick line permanently across their backs. The process of producing the tattoo was photographed, and the photograph later displayed in an art gallery in Spain.<sup>21</sup> The artist has defended the critical significance of this act as an illustration of brutal social conditions, adding that art is incapable of effectively intervening in the real world to alter such conditions, no matter what the political intentions of the artist may be. Others see the unequal relations of power, the physiognomic alteration of superfluous bodies, and the institutional support that such work receives as a disturbing reduction of art to a mirror or extension of the broader socioeconomic system.<sup>22</sup> But this work, and similar projects that embrace commodity status as a form of intentional, often ironic critique of art's reified status, merely restage the historical avant-garde as farce. Art meets and once more collides with life – only this time life irredeemably *sucks* (although not for the successful artist or for his/her admirers). There appears to be no “outside,” no other system or way of being that, if not already marked, is not imminently *brandable*. This dead end is a type of necro-aesthetic stalemate that is even more revealing of current cultural circumstances than is the actual work of art itself.

In fact, the shock produced by this enterprising art is nothing other than the real world, which, almost without assistance, makes the spectator squirm. It touches on some vestige of disgust for a system that treats large portions of the world's population as little more than excess, especially ones in the Global South. It feels good to feel something, even something unpleasant. However, by no longer operating from a superior position of ideological critique like so many artists of my generation, as well as those of the 1960s and 1970s, contemporary art becomes the conduit of a reified banality. It enters the gallery zombie-like, stiff with rigor mortis, yet clamoring to speak for itself. The art world is only too happy to listen.<sup>23</sup>

This is not a moral denunciation of those who trade in the desolation of the present moment. Much of what I am calling dark matter or informal social production is also disturbing, reified, and soulless, even though it lacks the ironic affectlessness of contemporary art. Like Swampwall, it takes no pleasure in delayed gratification or aesthetic detachment. This is not a moral criticism because reification also has its positive side, a point that some critics who defend politically and socially engaged art tend to forget. Nevertheless, by seeking to merge art and commerce, cruelty and objectification, and then merely to engage in acts of humiliation that are identical with, or even more compassionate than, those generated by the real global market, what the enterprise-artist reveals is a profound lack of the imagination. Artists, critics, and curators who glibly cite Duchamp as an authority when they defend high-priced slack art, commodified art, or objects not meant to be art, have in their hearts and minds a strict prohibition against democratizing aesthetic valorization to include the ranks of informal producers, no matter how interchangeable and indistinguishable with contemporary art this missing mass may be. Behind this aesthetic policing is a simple fact: that which is excluded from valorization is too diverse, too large, and too redundant to ever be fully absorbed by an art market whose prime mandate is to be the ultimate arbitrator of “real and lasting,” as well as cultural values (the type worth investing in).

Today, one can hardly escape an encounter with dark matter productivity. It radiates from homes and offices, schools and streets, community centers, prisons, and, most especially, cyberspace. It reveals itself in knitting circles, amateur garage-kit sculptors,

tattoo artists, crop-circle designers, fantasy role-play gamers (LARP), zinesters, and the hardcore disciples of hip-hop, goth, punk, and DIY subcultures, all of which actively spurn commercialization. It is produced by swarms of cyber-geeks generating open-source computer programs, fan videos, music mashups, and other forms of collectively networked freeware. In a word, these makeshift, amateur, and informal social practices are superabundant.

In addition, this dark matter production is by turns whimsical, banal, nostalgic, sentimental, angry, obscene, and grotesque, all modes of expression traditionally anathema to the fine arts and orthodox notions of aesthetic detachment. Insofar as a great portion of it refuses to be productive for the market, it testifies to other moments of resistance, to what Negt and Kluge have described as “imaginative strategies grounded in the experience of – protest energies, psychic balancing acts, a penchant for personalization, individual and collective fantasy, and creative re-appropriations.”<sup>24</sup> This includes not producing or not producing for the market, but for oneself, one’s friends, and one’s community, much in the way Swampwall was a small act of collaborative refusal as self-directed production.<sup>25</sup> For if being usefully productive confers membership in normal society and its market, then purposefully refusing to produce signifies a rejection of those norms. This is so regardless of how fleeting the circumstances of this refusal is, and no matter how constrained its circumstances are. As philosopher Bruno Gulli states, “the potential not to, the ability to say no, to withdraw, is freedom itself.”<sup>26</sup> It is also true regardless of whether or not one is informed by the classic philosophical arguments linking freedom with aesthetics.

When it comes to acts of resistance, the artist holds no special monopoly. A hidden social production has always found its own time and space apart from hegemonies of power and the objectifying routines of work: from ingenious contraband inventions made by prisoners out of paper clips, ballpoint pens, and toilet paper; to quilts cooperatively stitched in support of voting rights or in defense of a woman accused of murdering her husband; to the precarious margins of labor where teaching assistants, janitors, chain workers, and Starbucks baristas furtively organize themselves, sometimes under the black-cat logo of the International Workers of the World (IWW); and, most of all, during the supposedly restful hours when working bodies are meant to reproduce their labor power through idle pastimes, yet remain awake to fantasize, organize, play, and invent. These borderlands of resistance extend well beyond conventional conflicts between labor and capital to form a murky excrescence of affects, ideas, histories, sentiments, and technologies that shift in and out of visibility like some half-submerged reef. However, what is most alarming about the materialization of this informal, social production is found in neither appearance nor content per se. Dark matter presents a problem to mainstream market valorization because it embodies the overlooked, the discarded, and the superfluous as forming an actual excess of labor that, even under ideal economic conditions, would be impossible to openly and productively integrate under global capitalism.

The same holds true of the mini-market economy of the art world. It cannot absorb what is essentially a mass greater than itself (this would be analogous to reaching full employment and unrestricted democracy under capitalism, a goal impossible under Keynesian liberalism and completely shunned by neoliberals).

The need to generate more and more capital requires the majority of the population to be superfluous, as well as cowed by the authority of market productivity over sustainability.

The same holds true for high culture. If dark matter is like an un-representable shantytown surrounding the municipality of art, then when compared to high culture, its shadow productivity appears not only useless, but abject, and even a drain on resources. However, unlike the fictional scarcity demanded by the art market, nothing impedes most dark matter productivity from producing freely. It seems to partake in a gift economy, what Georges Bataille described as a “principle of loss,” or a pathological economy of expenditure without precise utility. Which is to say that the desire for social participation outweighs accumulation. Moving information, ideas, music, tactics, food, services, and goods around rather than piling them up also serves to adjust differences of power amongst individuals within the same social group. Some of this is what attracts theorists of the new, networked economy, as well as those who want to believe the art world can have its social-relational cake and eat it too.

At the same time, nothing assures us that this increasingly visible social productivity will be the force of liberty and democracy as many neoliberal evangelists of the “new economy” proclaim it will be. This missing cultural mass is not intrinsically progressive in the traditional liberal or radical sense of that term. As we have seen with the success of Donald Trump! It possesses only a potential for progressive resistance, as well as a potential for reactionary resistance. Such political and ethical ambiguities are an inevitable part of past struggles against repression, and it is time, as cultural historian Michael Denning insists, to begin to “make connections between the occasional eruptions – machine breakings, store lootings, window smashings” and that *longue durée* of resistance that may not even be aware of itself as a history from below. But Denning cautions that when interrupting the fragmented narrative of past resistance, one must read “not only between the lines of the letters sent in, but also the letters which were never sent.”<sup>27</sup> The revolutions that don’t take place are as disturbing as those that do. Recognizing the radically militant potential of dark-matter productivity is but one step towards that recognition.

Extending an essentially false gift of aesthetic recognition to informal production – as the so-called pro-am revolution proposes, or the way some professionally trained artists co-opt the work of community-based amateurs – is merely a false radicalism at best. Instead, organizing around one’s market redundancy is how politically savvy artists deal their dark-matter status. Collectives and groups give this structural superfluosity a name, visibly embodying the abjectness of dark matter while demanding to be seen and heard. Strangely, this recognition of redundancy provides a release. The “collectivized” artist not only can ignore modernist or “high art world” demands to prove her artistic genius, but she can focus pleasure, anger, and resentment towards the possibility of imagining a radically different social and cultural terrain. This materialization of dark matter may only exist for a day, a year, or a few years at best, and there is no guarantee of success: no teleology at work, no way back. But what the militant collective grasps is something Walter Benjamin described as that “secret agreement between past generations and the present one.”<sup>28</sup> It is a deliberate, even willful linkage that opens up a potential for redeeming the supernumeraries of the past by fixing what has gone terribly wrong in the present. It also represents a claim by these past generations over the present. As Benjamin reminds us, that claim “cannot be settled cheaply.”<sup>29</sup>

## Notes

1. An earlier version of this article was originally printed in *Proximity Magazine*, Issue 001 May/June (2008), 35–45.
2. Negt and Kluge (1993, 32).
3. Description is from the website of the Worcester Art Museum for Tony Feher's April 26–August 11th 2002 exhibition: <http://www.worcesterart.org/Exhibitions/Past/feher.html>.
4. Taylor (1995, 153).
5. Beech and Roberts derive their notion of the distracted viewer from Walter Benjamin's (1969) discussion regarding how the masses view cinema in what he describes as an almost tactile manner of perception, see Beech and Roberts (2002) and Benjamin (1969a).
6. This does not mean that artists are becoming computer literate using Photoshop instead of canvases and paint, but, rather, that many fine-art programs barely teach computer skills, and students must pursue these as an elective.
7. Roberts (2007, 159).
8. *The Pro-Am Revolution*. <https://www.demos.co.uk/files/proamrevolutionfinal.pdf>.
9. "Women's Unpaid Work: Some Statistics," *The Guardian*, March 7, 2000, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2000/mar/07/gender1>, see also a more recent piece by Bryce Covert "It's Not Just Us: Women Around the World Do More Housework And Have Less Free Time," *Thinkprogress.org*, March 14, 2014: <https://thinkprogress.org/its-not-just-us-women-around-the-world-do-more-housework-and-have-less-free-time-588457dd1b144169.6uxsupog8>
10. Charlie Leadbeater, *The Pro Am Revolution*. <http://charlesleadbeater.net/2004/11/the-pro-am-revolution/>.
11. Howkins (2002), cited from promotional synopsis: <http://www.livrariacultura.com.br/p/the-creative-economy-858211>.
12. Benkler (2006, 117).
13. Caffentzis (1999, 154).
14. Moore (2004, 472–73).
15. Duncan (1983, 172, 180).
16. McCarthy et al. (2005).
17. W.A.G.E.: <http://www.wageforwork.com>; Debtfair: <http://www.debtfair.org>; BFAMFAPHD: <http://bfamfaphd.com>
18. "Creative dark matter is neither fully contiguous with, nor symmetrical to the products, institutions, or discourse of high art. However, it is possible to imagine a thought experiment that would measure its aggregate impact on the art world – if, say, one were to organize an art fabricators strike, or a boycott of international art magazines demanding these journals cover creative work made by the glut of artists who go unobserved in the art world, or if art students and faculty walked out of classes and refused to attend exhibitions at The Tate, the Reina Sophia, or the MoMA, or, worse yet, collectively stopped purchasing art supplies until everyone associated with cultural production was in some way recognized by the system, including regional watercolor and sketch clubs. Needless to say, the obvious economic disruption would be inseparable from the simultaneous symbolic disruption of aesthetic valorization." Sholette (2010, 41).
19. Rosler (1997).
20. Many of these artists and collectives have fallen into the equivalent of a dark-matter archive. See Sholette (2010).
21. Santiago Sierra's *Línea de 160cm Tatuada sobre 4 Personas (160cm Line Tattooed on 4 People)* was exhibited at El Gallo Arte Contemporáneo, Salamanca, Spain, in December 2000.
22. "Having a tattoo is normally a personal choice. But when you do it under 'renumerated' conditions, this gesture becomes something that seems awful, degrading – it perfectly illustrates the tragedy of our social hierarchies." Santiago Sierra quoted in Spiegler (2003).
23. Sierra's work is only more evidence that the global art world is incapable of reestablishing its historic alliance with emancipatory politics, defaulting instead to an altogether different and far less ambitious precedent, *épater la bourgeoisie*.

24. Miriam Hansen writing in the Foreword to Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge's book *Public Sphere and Experience* (1993, xxxii).
25. "Even so-called unproductive labor is then understood as unproductive only of and for capital, from the point of view of capital. In this reality this 'unproductive' labor often relates to essential social needs." Hansen from Negt and Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience*, *ibid.*
26. Gulli (2005, 66).
27. Denning (2004, 40).
28. Benjamin (1969b), 254.
29. *Ibid.*

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## Attention under repair: asceticism from self-care to care of the self

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This essay examines the contemporary mindfulness movement as a cultural response to a larger problem of attention in the United States. As raw material for both capital (re)production and subjectivity, attention is a zone of indeterminacy and struggle for workers in a so-called immaterial economy. This essay suggests that the rise of concern around “paying attention” from the 1950s onward is driven by post-Fordist labor requirements more than networked technologies. First, it examines mindfulness as a technique of attention management for businesses and gives a broad survey of its current popularity and prevalence in US culture. Second, it proposes viewing techniques of attention like mindfulness through a triple lens of repair: (1) as managerial tools to repair psychic labor capacity for capital; (2) as practices that subjects use to repair alienation; and (3) as sites for reparative reading. Third, the essay illuminates the ties between Eve Sedgwick’s repair and Michel Foucault’s care of the self in order to suggest that resistance to practicing the self is founded on a paranoid defense. Its central argument is that attention is a method in Foucault’s care of the self, and, as such, a potential portal into pleasure and political change rather than a mere feedback loop into capital.

**Keywords:** attention; mindfulness; Google; post-Fordism; affect; affective labor; Eve Sedgwick; Michel Foucault; Melanie Klein

### Introduction

A police officer attends a meditation retreat. What kind of reflex might one already have to this imagined scene? Cheri Maples arrived at Plum Village skeptical that even Thich Nhat Hanh, a world-renowned spiritual leader and Buddhist monk, could offer something applicable to a person whose profession involves wielding a firearm. Maples thought: “I can’t take this mindfulness training, I carry a gun for a living” (Maples 2015). But assuring her that she belonged, Hanh in turn asked her: “Who else would we want to carry a gun except somebody who will do it mindfully?”

Shortly after returning to her law-enforcement job in Madison, Wisconsin, Maples had a close encounter with this very question. She was on a domestic-violence call that involved no physical violence, but in her narration, it was a classic breakup scenario wherein a father was holding a child hostage during a custody exchange. “Ordinarily I would have said,

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‘That’s it,’ slapped the handcuffs on him, taken him to jail,” she recalls. “But something stopped me”:

I got the little girl ... got her and her mom set. ... And I just talked to this guy from my heart, and, within five minutes ... I’ve got this big gun belt on. I’m about 5’3”. Right? And this guy’s like 6’6”. And he’s bawling, you know. And I’m holding this guy with this big gun belt on. ... he was just in incredible pain, and that’s what I started realizing we deal with, is misplaced anger because people are in incredible pain. (Maples 2008)

For Maples, the significance of this story is that she displaced a procedural response by exercising the ability to inhabit the present moment openly and attentively, a skill she attributed to the mindfulness training at Plum Village. Through a practice of deliberate attention, what she highlighted was that she prevented an arrest by interrupting a response she believed was based in paranoia.

In a 2015 follow-up interview on the radio show *On Being*, Maples can be heard giving an account of structural paranoia in the criminal-justice system that bears surprising resemblance to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s description in “Paranoid and Reparative Reading.” In this essay, Sedgwick draws on Melanie Klein to argue that reparative reading is accomplished by moving to the depressive position, or “the position from which it is possible in turn to use one’s own resources to assemble or ‘repair’ the murderous part-objects into something like a whole” (Sedgwick 2003, 128). The subject does so by recognizing a degree of dependency on the other, experiencing guilt for the destruction dealt to them in the psyche, empathizing with them, and holding simultaneously the co-existence in them of both good and bad. Paranoia, on the other hand, Sedgwick (2003, 128) describes as “a position of terrible alertness” to the dangers posed by others. Maples’ interview describes paranoia in similar terms and advocates mindful attention as a mode of repair:

It’s a radical political act to learn to live in more harmony with others. We train [officers] to anticipate trouble everywhere ... So what we do or don’t do becomes a very strongly conditioned pathway in the brain. And as police officers we’re taught to anticipate troubling threats coming unexpectedly from everywhere all the time. The more that our minds are primed to anticipate trouble, the more we’re geared toward fear and aggression, and not taking risks to affirm and explore other potential ways of being. (Maples 2015)

Citing a heightened capacity for the kind of compassionate presence advocated in Hanh’s mindfulness teachings, Maples claims that the practice proved to be “so helpful to me in my career because without tools of awareness, cynicism and an armored heart are almost built into the job” (Maples 2015).

This anecdote is not an easy one. It is a tense moment bound to set off alarms for prison abolitionists, anti-racist feminists, and other critics whose knowledge of carceral state violence would make them bristle at the mention of a “mindful” police officer. This is perhaps why, too, this anecdote is important: because of its uneasy pairing of tenderness and violence poised to tip in either direction. State force carried out under the aegis of “compassion” is differently if not equally as insidious as that carried out unabashedly: the mode might differ but structural domination remains the same. Victimized police officers or insisting on their parallel vulnerability obscures their ultimate recourse to power through

the state. To add even further complication, the scene Maples describes is gendered, with her comparably small frame up against a larger one, and where she provides care for a potentially abusive person – highlighting her role as an emotional laborer. And yet there is a difference between what Maples did and an arrest. With the presence of the gun, what is at stake in her pause is life or death.

To remain in spaces of precarious, dangerous, and difficult tension is partly what mindfulness asks, and mindfulness itself, as a cultural phenomenon and a practice in the United States, is precarious in its potential utilizations – who can say how or when it will be put to work? Rather than parsing the extent to which Maples' case is a technique of power, or, alternatively, an aperture into what Angela Davis (2003, 107) calls "a justice system based on reparation and reconciliation rather than retribution and vengeance", I use this story to index – or provoke – the indeterminacy of the space itself, which mindfulness both opens up as a practice and occupies as a cultural object. In offering up Maples' vignette, I want it to hover exemplarily in the background while I open up the themes of attention, work, and repair at play in Maples' account.

In what follows, I treat the contemporary "mindfulness movement" (CBS 2014) as a cultural response to a larger problem concerning attention in the United States. One basis for this exploration is a suspicion that attention to attention has multiplied since the middle of the twentieth century, as the US economy underwent a shift from Fordist to post-Fordist labor. As raw material for both capital (re)production and subjectivity, attention is a zone of indeterminacy and struggle; and the popular draw to mindfulness, among a range of other ascetic practices that appeal to so-called immaterial workers and employers, can be taken as a case study in this struggle. First, I offer one way of viewing the rise in concern around "paying attention" from the 1950s to today by focusing on attention's importance for so-called immaterial economy. Second, I explore mindfulness as a technique of attention management and give a broad survey of its current popularity and prevalence in US culture. Third, I propose viewing techniques of attention – mindfulness in this case – through a triple lens of repair: (1) as managerial tools to repair psychic labor capacity for capital; (2) as practices that subjects use to repair alienation; and (3) as sites for reparative reading. In comparing "self-care" to Foucault's "care of the self," my aim is to push back against a resistance to practicing the self that is founded on a paranoid defense against capital recuperation. My central argument is that attention is a method in what Foucault describes as care of the self, and, as such, a potential portal into pleasure and political change rather than a mere feedback loop into capital.

### **Attention in post-Fordism**

This project is the beginning of an inquiry into attention in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Inspired by Jonathan Crary's endpoint in *Suspensions in Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture*, I track concerns around attention that continued to rise during the 1900s and suggest, in this particular essay, that the importance placed on it shifted from the mid-twentieth century onward. The 1940s and 1950s saw a meteoric rise in research and classification of subjects with attention disorders in the field of psychology. Scientists used the term "Minimal Brain Dysfunction" (MBD) to characterize the problem throughout the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, conceptualizing a cluster of

characteristics like “impairment in perception” and “short attention span” as symptoms of brain damage (Clements 1966). Throughout this period, amphetamines were tested to mitigate inattentiveness in children, culminating in the approval of Ritalin by the FDA in 1955 and its eventual prescription in the 1960s (Myers 2007). The DSM-II in 1968 marked a nominal shift away from MBD to “Hyperkinetic Reaction of Childhood,” a change in terminology that reflected movement away from thinking about the disorder as brain damage, and each edition since DSM-III (1980) has retained the approximate nomenclature of Attention Deficit [Hyperactivity] Disorder (ADHD). From there, stimulant treatment for children diagnosed with ADHD doubled every four to seven years between 1971 and 1987 (Safer, Zito, and Fine 1996, 1084–1088), and the 1990s saw an explosion in diagnoses and pharmaceutical treatment for children, amounting to the widespread normalization of the condition. By 2013, the amount of children on medication for ADHD had risen to 3.5 million from 600,000 in 1990 (Schwarz 2013). And *The New York Times* reported in 2013 that the fastest-growing market for ADHD stimulants was adults, whom they dubbed “the new frontier”: indeed, the number of adults on medication for attention disorders doubled between 2008 and 2012 (Schwarz 2014).

The medical figures sketched here display just one facet of attention’s rise to the status of a national crisis from the mid-twentieth century through the beginning of the twenty-first. During this period, popular assumptions about attention became aligned with the national medical industry’s narrative; not only the notion that “normal,” “healthy” attentive capacity exists, but that deficit is widespread and natural too: ADHD is a “genetic” disorder unrelated to weakness of will but rather to a neurological condition not of one’s own choosing (Crary 2001). The simultaneous demand and inability to pay attention became a leading preoccupation to the extent that subjects conceptualized themselves in relation to an imagined attentive standard. Due to the popularity of the disorder and discourse around it, contemporary subject formation cannot be understood without acknowledging the attentive self-monitoring and self-diagnosis to which individuals incessantly submit themselves. In this formulation, they are both *not* responsible for the state of their damaged attention span and *highly* responsible for ensuring that it is up to par, regardless of how that expectation is fulfilled. A prime example of this is an advertisement by Shire Pharmaceuticals – the manufacturer of Adderall RX – which sustains the dual rhetoric of victimized patient and responsible, rational actor by beckoning viewers to “Own your ADHD.”<sup>1</sup>

Through the turn of the century, managing attention span became imperative for proper (neo)liberal subjects to demonstrate adequate self-control, as well as to participate in the workforce. One can assume that the specific nature of production and consumption during this period required a synchronization that subjects struggled to attain, which could only be achieved by problematizing attention span and subsequently proceeding to “fix” it through stimulant medication. In other words, attention-span management is about bringing subjects into sync with the speed of the economy in order to ensure their ability to labor and otherwise live in the world. If Antonio Gramsci was correct in suggesting that under Fordism “[t]he only thing that is completely mechanised [sic] is the physical gesture,” and Fordist workers’ muscle memory allows them to harmonize with the repetitive movements of their trade in such a way that their work “leaves the brain free and unencumbered for other occupations” (Gramsci 1971, 277–318), this attentive wandering is not the case for the post-Fordist worker engaged in emotional, intellectual,

or otherwise “immaterial” labor. The latter engages in work that specifically requires cognitive vigilance and relational responsiveness, making stimulants less a performance enhancer than a capitalist economy’s *sine qua non*.<sup>2</sup> Even when not working – to the extent that non-work can be gauged within the work/leisure collapse (Lazzarato 2014) – it is a telling moment when a drug prescribed for improving productive capacity becomes one popularly used for “recreation,” further implicating the work/leisure collapse and suggesting that falling out of tempo with the economy is to be avoided even when off the clock.<sup>3</sup> Despite the implicit equation of attention span with work, however, it has rarely been analyzed in terms of economic structure.

Hardt and Negri (2004) have argued that the shift from an industrial to a service economy in the mid-twentieth century meant that “immaterial labor” became hegemonic not quantitatively but qualitatively (109). For them, this labor generally takes two forms: (1) “that which is primarily intellectual or linguistic, such as problem solving, symbolic and analytical tasks, and linguistic expressions;” and (2) that which “produces or manipulates affects such as a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, or passion” (109). I further the claims made by scholars of post-Fordism by suggesting that immaterial labor accelerates and reorganizes the problems of attention that were set into motion by urbanization, spectacularization, and industrial development in the nineteenth century (Crary 2001). The ability to pay attention is the foundation of all labor to varying degrees, but differently so for intellectual and affective work, which typically requires “face-to-face or voice-to-voice contact” with others (Hochschild 2003, 147). In this framework, the full force of one’s emotion is part of job performance, and this requires that workers conjure the “strength of [their bodies’] total excitation” (Preciado 2013, 41) to deliver a range of services. A classic example of this can be found in Arlie Russell Hochschild’s (2003, 147) influential *The Managed Heart*, where Winn-Dixie grocery stores incentivized both workers and customers to police the emotional labor of cashiers. According to a 1982 article in the *St. Petersburg Times*, store clerks wore one-dollar bills pinned to their uniforms and were to hand them over if they did not welcome customers with a “friendly greeting and a sincere thank you.” Integral to pleasant customer experience, but easy to pass over, is the worker’s degree of presence: the leaflet advertising the store’s courtesy campaign told customers they could expect the cashier’s “complete attention” (149). What appears as rote institutional prose in this and many cases is in fact the sinew of the immaterial economy.

In an economic landscape where mindset, mood, and affectation comprise the means of production, one can see how the ground might be fertile for a technique of attention like mindfulness, because it is a direct attempt at an all-encompassing and holistic presence of the self. The assemblage of Buddhist-inspired philosophies known as “mindfulness” reached a tipping point in the United States in 2014. Named a “revolution” on the cover of *TIME* and a “movement” by *60 Minutes*, mindfulness so seamlessly integrated into the US cultural imaginary as to be banal (Pickert 2014). Defined as the act of “paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally” (Baime n.d.), the practice was and continues to be introduced into prisons, elementary schools, the US military, and private business. Studies boasting the health benefits of meditation are published multiple times a day, often delivering results of the neurochemical transformations it can incur. A history of the colonization, war, and immigration that caused a global redistribution of

Buddhist practice is outside the scope of this essay, as is a careful analysis of which characteristics, from which Buddhist traditions, are conveniently paired with a capitalist ethos to create the rubric of secular mindfulness. I contend, however, that Western interest in Buddhism since the mid-twentieth century became so widespread partly because the Orientalist, fetishized versions crafted by its proponents in the US provide an antithesis to the structure of work within heightened, technologized capitalism. The slow philosophies of Buddhism are positioned in contrast with the speed of contemporary digital media, and as such, are frequently proffered for decreasing the stress and tempo attributed to digitally mediated life. But the understanding of Buddhism's appeal – along with the understanding of attention span in general – typically stops there, resulting in a shallow, uncritical technological determinism.

For example, Soren Gordhamer, the founder of the popular conference on mindfulness and business called Wisdom 2.0, penned a *Huffington Post* article in 2009 titled “The Attention Crisis: And you Thought the Economic Crisis was Bad.” Despite writing in the thick of the recession, the Jimi Hendrix epigraph was the only nod to economic critique: “I am so broke, I can't even pay attention.” Had the article focused on the relation between attentive capacity and class, the article might have been more revelatory, but instead it furthered the conceit of their separation by concluding: “So while the country is focused intently on the economic crisis, another crisis looms, which could be even more devastating. Our attention is also nearing bankruptcy, and needs just as thorough restructuring” (Gordhamer 2009). Like many analyses of distraction, attention, and mindfulness in popular discourse, the piece scolds attachment to technological devices without placing that attachment in a larger socio-economic context. He doesn't acknowledge the necessary utilization of technology for many workers' survival or the fact that many fear the economic consequences of slowing down, disconnection, or contemplation. He rather ignores the question of work entirely, rendering obsolete questions like how attention might be calibrated to the tempo of economic production, or how attachment to digital media flourishes amid the alienation that is produced through the organization of life under capital. With individual Wisdom 2.0 tickets starting at \$600 each, to name just one example, this lacuna in Gordhamer's logic is profitable for him and many others in an industry of mindfulness retreats, consulting, and beach resorts; many adherents never link attention to the manner in which life is (re)produced. The inference to be made in popular narrations is that the problem is one of consumption, which can be ameliorated with a slightly different kind of consumption. It is for these reasons that my goal is to shift focus away from a media-based analysis of attention toward one that begins from economic production.

Dominant mindfulness narratives typically explain that people in the West suffer because their ability to pay attention has been dislocated, either by technology or through unnamed but naturalized processes (like “busyness”). Thus, the practice attempts to apply attention toward various ends, and it circulates as a panacea for a variety of purposes: from high blood pressure to high crime; eating disorders to bad grades; and depression to PTSD. But inasmuch as it is possible to generalize, mindfulness is most often prescribed for three overlapping categories: (1) those who need a momentary temporal oasis in order to **cope** with the pace of contemporary life, in which mindfulness may be used to replenish emotional capacities before they are depleted again; (2) those who wish to **reconnect** with the richness of sensory experience or remedy a

subjective experience of estrangement: and (3) those who need to **improve** their ability to concentrate, which usually translates as a desire to be more productive. In sum, mindfulness represents the convergence of these three desires, and the goal for many contemporary subjects is not only to be effective at whatever activity one engages, but also to sensually enjoy it.

### **Repair in service to capital**

Riding the wave of popular interest in mindfulness, businesses have recognized the benefits of psychic repair for their bottom line. When Marx wrote that the owners of capital factored in the minimum needs for reproducing labor power, today he might have gestured toward the workplace perks famously offered by major financial and technology corporations, like endless coolers of free organic food, gyms, and meditation lounges. In 1983, one of the first reported uses of Buddhist practice as a technique for capital reproduction/repair in the US had a CEO reporting that after providing workers with transcendental meditation for three years, “absenteeism fell by 85%, productivity rose 120%, and profit soared 520%” (Roth 1988). By 2007, Raytheon, Monsanto, and many others had seized upon mindfulness training for corporate wellness (Carroll 2008), and in the past five years, mindfulness has exploded in the contemporary business world: the financial and tech industries – powerhouses of immaterial labor – lead the way with corporate-funded programs, inspiring some journalists to quip that mindfulness is Silicon Valley’s “new caffeine” (Schachtman 2013). Google famously offers an in-house mindfulness course called “Search Inside Yourself” that amasses a wait list each offering, and BlackRock financial, Intel, Adobe, and others offer similar programs.

In the book penned by Google’s former “guru,” Chade-Meng Tan, also titled *Search Inside Yourself*, Meng draws from the tenets of workplace Emotional Intelligence (EI) to emphasize the importance of self-awareness at work. For Meng, self-awareness functions as a key not only to enjoying the present moment but to better ascertaining one’s sensation, and specifically by paying attention to the space between stimulus and response. He writes:

To quote Viktor Frankl, “Between stimulus and response, there is a space. In that space lies our freedom and our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our happiness.” What a mind of calmness and clarity does is to increase that space for us. (Tan 2014, 20)

This Frankl reference is one of the most widely circulated maxims in American mindfulness. Meng is just one among many organizational leaders who feel justified prescribing it because it has been kissed with the approval of modern science. Emphasizing the ability to make healthy decisions under stress, for example, an author in *Scientific American* writes: “MRI scans show that after an eight-week course of mindfulness practice, the brain’s ‘fight or flight’ center, the amygdala, appears to shrink” (Ireland 2014). The fight-or-flight moment is the one in which mindfulness advocates recommend pausing to breathe because intentional delay between stimulus and response in high-stress scenarios might allow a practitioner to process the present with resolve. But it is crucial to note that Meng emphasizes the importance of such self-awareness for the purpose of “taking

responsibility for personal performance” and “keeping disruptive emotions and impulses in check” (Tan 2014, 104). Paying attention to the space between stimulus and response, Meng writes, “can mean the difference between screaming at some guy or being able to stop and tell yourself, ‘I cannot scream at that guy; he is the CEO!’” (Tan 2014, 81). This maneuver by Meng constitutes a disciplinary measure aimed at instilling proper conduct in workers and exemplifies a motive of repair for capitalist business. Implicit in this framework is the need for mindfulness not to exceed the parameters of the already-existing capital relation, as well as a suggestion that one use it as a happiness enhancer, as if happiness is not intrinsically tied to work. Like Gordhamer’s lacuna, Meng’s platform wills the fact of work under capital out of the equation. Willed attention at one’s job does not guarantee fulfillment and potentially quite the opposite; being more mindful at work could have disquieting effects for workers who could in turn call business into question. What becomes clear with mindfulness’ integration into business is that the practice itself must be managed.

### **Repair of the self for the self**

Amid the height of rhetoric around Western subjects’ attention deficits and multiplying diagnoses of ADHD, mindfulness belongs to a collection of self-monitoring and self-care practices currently provoking debate about whether the United States has surpassed the pharmaceutical era (Szczurba 2014). What is meant by this is that more subjects are turning toward alternate, non-invasive means of health and wellness like “brain-tracking” and biofeedback. Mindfulness is intertwined with these quantifications, as increasing numbers of scientists and engineers are developing technologies that aid contemplative practice, like meditation software for the Oculus Rift, portable EEG machines for displaying brain waves of relaxation back to practitioners, and wearable technology that alerts users to “take a deep breath” (Beres 2014). But even when mindfulness is analog and stands alone, it should be seen as a technology that has begun to supplement, when it doesn’t replace, a pharmaceutical solution to attention (or depression, or anxiety). Articles are published with increasing frequency about the suitability of mindfulness as a non-medical treatment for depression, anxiety, ADHD, and PTSD. I am suggesting that there might be something telling about the decreasing appeal of pharmaceutical medication – which abdicates willpower to chemicals that then work magic upon the body – and the increasing appeal of galvanizing the will in order to train the mind. Mindfulness, if taken seriously, can be a rigorous practice of self-control.

Repair of the self for the self uses mindfulness to treat alienation. It is crucial to keep in mind that many are drawn to the practice on their own time as a technique for repairing the psychic and corporeal damage wrought by laboring – whether they pursue it in the form of personal meditation practice or breath work, participation in Sanghas, yoga, or Buddhist-inspired self-help literature. As with Google’s mindfulness teachings, this self-care doubtlessly cuts both ways: laborers’ efforts to replenish their emotional resources and fragmented attention spans inadvertently function as capitalist reproduction. And this makes mindfulness an easy target for critics who dismiss self-care as neoliberal ideology or biopolitical control, since logics of meditation and yoga like flexibility, self-management, and stretching could not be more perfect for an era of capitalism known for precarity and

entrepreneurialism. But it would be a mistake to see capitalism as having produced the desire to self-optimize. More accurately, capital is parasitic and leeches on to already-existing desires of its subjects for self-fulfillment.

Wendy Brown is one scholar among many who stresses the hyperindividualizing effects of neoliberalism. This form of capitalism, she writes, “figures individuals as rational, calculating creatures whose moral autonomy is measured by their capacity for ‘self-care’ – the ability to provide for their own needs and service their own ambitions” (Brown 2005, 42). Rightfully so, the problem with self-care for Brown is that it is synonymous with the entrepreneurial ethos that holds individuals personally responsible for either succumbing to or transcending structural inequality. An abundance of scholarly work demonstrates that the neoliberal era has emphasized an ideology of self-responsibility in place of collective infrastructures once provided by governmental social welfare. But even with such infrastructure in place would there not be a care of the self that social welfare leaves untouched? What I am suggesting is that for some critics, capitalism’s instrumentalization of personal responsibility becomes grounds for a paranoid reflex against care of the self, if not the staging of a total refusal to take oneself as object of one’s attention. What may result is self-neglect or an overestimation of collectivity, as if liberation and joy result from the act of mere togetherness. Critics often refuse work on the self because it becomes interchangeable with a neo(liberal) architecture of control, and because it is, in fact, immaterial labor. But if capitalist recuperation simply cannot be avoided, is it worth parsing out a difference between “self-care” in service to capital and the kind of “care of the self” so lauded by Foucault?

In an interview from 1984, “The Ethic of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom,” Foucault distinguished between liberation and practices of liberty, which he believed were often conflated. “When a colonial people tries to free itself of its colonizer,” he said, “that is truly an act of liberation, in the strict sense of the word. But as we also know, that in this extremely precise example, this act of liberation is not sufficient to establish the practices of liberty that will later on become necessary for this people” (Foucault 1987, 114). Even if one is freed from a state of domination one must still contend with relationships of power; liberation “does not manifest a contented being” but rather opens the field for games of power to circulate more freely (114). Practices of liberty must be undertaken by individuals in order to ensure that relationships of power can be navigated with a minimum of domination. It is along these lines that Foucault turned to focus on ethical practices and less on coercive practices and scientific truth games. While a state of domination might limit capacity to exercise practices of liberty, practices of liberty are necessary if freedom is to be exercised in an ethical way.

For examples of what forms these practices might take, Foucault turned to Greco-Roman asceticism in many of his works from this era. In *Care of the Self*, he reframes the Imperial Era as a “golden age in the cultivation of the self” (Foucault 1986, 45) during which philosophy insisted that one “attend to oneself,” “transform oneself,” “turn and return to oneself,” and “spend your whole life learning how to live” (46–49). Attending to the self was an art of existence and, crucially, a labor: “It takes time” (50). In the following excerpt Foucault describes an evening scene in which such care takes place, as Seneca reflects upon his day:

Seneca, in the example he gives here, singles out such actions as arguing too intensely with ignorant people, whom one cannot convince in any case, or vexing, through reproaches, a friend whom one would have liked to help improve. Seneca is dissatisfied with these ways of behaving insofar as, in order to achieve the goals that one must in fact set for oneself, the means employed were not the right ones: it is good to want to correct one's friends, if need be, but reproof is too extreme and gives offense instead of helping; it is good to convince those who don't know, but it is necessary first to choose such people as are capable of being taught. (Foucault 1986, 62)

Attentive practice figures heavily as reflection, introspection, and contemplation: an "active leisure" (Foucault 1988). Periods of retreat would often be spent writing letters or accounts of the everyday, wherein "attention was paid to nuances of life, mood, and reading" (Foucault 1988). But most importantly care of the self "constituted, not an exercise in solitude, but a true social practice" (Foucault 1986, 51) in two primary ways: first, whatever attention one devoted to the self doubled over its effects onto others. These practices could help ensure that one conducted oneself in an ethical – though not uncomplicated – way with others. And, second, care of the self was built into the social through institutional structures like schools, mentoring and teaching, spiritual services provided by philosophers to families or groups, and friendship.

A social infrastructure supporting care of the self is notably absent from neoliberal self-care. The question is where, when, and in what ways does mindfulness function as the "care of the self" described here, and what are its limits in societies structured by exploitation? Perhaps more importantly for my interests is the inverse: how do refusals to train attention contribute to this lack of infrastructure? If socioeconomic conditions are organized against a social infrastructure supporting care of the self, I am concerned with what we can make if we take this as the condition and what can be built despite it. Autonomous yet interwoven attention to oneself as means for quality of life is different than an attention deployed for the accumulation of capital. The contemporary mindfulness movement is an important site to watch, because lurking behind its seemingly innocuous interface is a fraught antagonism where attention threatens to go both ways.

### **Asceticism and repair**

In "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading," Eve Sedgwick writes that "to theorize out of anything but a paranoid critical stance has come to seem naive, pious, or complaisant" (2003, 126). She challenges the special status of paranoid reading as "the very stuff of truth," arguing that a habitual hermeneutic of suspicion may cause subjects to "misrecognize whether and where real conceptual work is getting done" (136). Further, viewing the world through the formula of paranoia might actually make it "less rather than more possible to unpack the local, contingent relations between any given piece of knowledge and its narrative/epistemological entailments for the seeker, knower, or teller" (124). Does knowing that corporate mindfulness is a hack, or exposing that neoliberalism dumps structural problems onto individuals by promoting self-care, necessarily provoke action or mean that one's energies are best spent refusing care of the self?

As mentioned previously, Sedgwick writes that reparative reading is accomplished through one's decision to move to the depressive position, or "the position from which it

is possible in turn to use one's own resources to assemble or 'repair' the murderous part-objects into something like a whole" (128). The individual, the infant, or the reader does this by empathizing with the other and recognizing in them both good and bad qualities. In order to read reparatively, it is worth noting that Sedgwick stresses that the subject "uses one's own resources;" where the paranoid subject faults the other for being lovable or damaged, the depressive takes responsibility for both self and other. It is interesting but not accidental that Sedgwick uses agential terms here: note that the paranoid and reparative modes are "practices," "motives," "ambitions," and "strategies" (150). Klein herself had fashioned positions from Freud's stages, and Sedgwick continued this lineage of modification by re-writing Melanie Klein's positions – a bit more rigid and fixed – into practices.

In a tie seldom noted between Sedgwick and Foucault, Sedgwick actually states that her theory of reparative practice is *based* on Foucault's care of the self:

[The depressive] position inaugurates ethical possibility ... founded on and coextensive with the subject's movement toward what Foucault calls "care of the self," the often fragile concern to provide the self with pleasure and nourishment in an environment that is perceived as not particularly offering them.

(Sedgwick 2003, 137)

In the same essay, Sedgwick also writes that "of all forms of love, paranoia is the most ascetic, the love that demands least from its object" (132). The reparative is a form of exposure or vulnerability that requires discipline, undoubtedly, but it does not seek self-sustainment – it asks something of the other. If we remember Foucault's shift in focus from coercive practices to ascetic practice, what we get from this juxtaposition of Sedgwick and Foucault is an understanding of Foucault's shift as from one ascetic practice to another: namely from the paranoid preemptive theorizing of how we got here to what to do in the meantime. Foucault shifted toward an asceticism that demanded more from its object.

## Conclusion

When examined beside care of the self, popular mindfulness constitutes more of a conundrum than a paranoid reading can account for. Foucault demonstrates that attending to oneself imprints, in turn, upon the other, resulting in collective enrichment; Sedgwick likewise presents the depressive position as a project of the self that increases the pleasure of survival. If to seek pleasure through repair is a "risky positional shift" (137), the rejection of self-care that masquerades as political resistance might instead be a paranoid position invested in avoiding risk. But what risk? Self-care working out well for capital? Or is such a paranoid reflex resistance to what is frightening in the fact of openness within the depressive position?

This project began as an attempt to think generatively about what would be left over if structural change did occur, or when structural change seems to be forestalled into the distance, or what to do on the way there. Ultimately, I am suggesting that an ascetic paying-attention might be a portal into the pleasure, collective enjoyment, and political change so desired by critics, rather than a mere feedback loop into entrepreneurial capital. I am

proposing a strategic attention that is capable of discerning a difference, where there is one, between care of the self and neoliberal self-care, and that is willing to take risks where there is not one. Care of the self might hyperbolize neoliberal injunctions of self-care by restoring such asceticism to the very sociality that neoliberalism strips. And, finally, this cultivated attention might be recognizable by its re-pairing of ascetic practice with structural analysis.

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### Notes

1. Shire Pharmaceuticals’ “Own It” campaign can be found here: <http://www.ownyourADHD.com>.
2. John Edwards sued Harvard Medical School when his son committed suicide shortly after being prescribed Adderall and antidepressants at Harvard. This case is one of many that demonstrate the normalization of amphetamines for productivity. See: [http://www.democracynow.org/2013/12/17/the\\_selling\\_of\\_adhd\\_diagnoses\\_prescriptions](http://www.democracynow.org/2013/12/17/the_selling_of_adhd_diagnoses_prescriptions)
3. See Cat Marnell’s *Vice* columns about her Adderall addiction. <http://nymag.com/thecut/2012/06/cat-marnell-explains-her-split-from-xojanecom.html>

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## Bad math: calculating bodily capacity in Cassils's *Cuts: A Traditional Sculpture*

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This article reads Cassils' 2011 durational performance piece *Cuts: A Traditional Sculpture* alongside the messy arithmetic of Karl Marx's *Grundrisse* in order to ask after the place of measurement within theories of bodily capacity and living labor.

**Keywords:** athleticism; durational performance; Marxism; capacity; affect studies; feminist performance art

Notebook IV of Karl Marx's *Grundrisse* – a continuation of the Chapter on Capital – opens with an attempt to clarify the confusion between profit and surplus value and to disprove the “erroneous calculation” of economists (“Carey and his consorts”) who conclude that “the share of labor rises as the rate of profit falls.”<sup>1</sup> Marx's effort is, to put it crudely, very numbers-heavy. After five arduous pages of percentages, postulations, equivalences, and calculation, his voice re-emerges abruptly: “The devil take this wrong arithmetic. But never mind. *Commençons de nouveau.*”<sup>2</sup> The momentary eruption of an arguably more human Marx provides a welcome respite from the seemingly endless calculations that precede and succeed it; the contemporary reader may delight in the sudden shift to a colloquial tone, anachronistic as its emphatic may be. For my part, I can't quite tell if I'm heartened or annoyed that the repetitive quantitative examples that have clouded my reading and stalled my progress have also confounded Marx himself. The associated footnote explains: “The numerical examples above and below contained occasional, always trivial errors of arithmetic. The corrections, as indicated by MELI, have been implicitly substituted here, unless noted.”<sup>3</sup> Irony abounds given that these trivial errors should appear as Marx attempts to correct the presumably more serious “erroneous calculation” of Carey and his consorts, though his use of French indicates that perhaps Marx takes his errors in good humor (or perhaps it indicates the extent of his exasperation, or his exhaustion).

In any case, I'm not trying to play “Gotcha!” with Marx. Rather, I wonder what this little moment reveals about the *Grundrisse's* method.<sup>4</sup> Of course, Marx does begin his labor anew, valiantly undeterred as always. The plea “devil take this wrong arithmetic” followed by “never mind” reveals a contradictory insistence, in which the specificity of the concrete

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example remains crucial even as its theory is defended as strong enough to withstand a sloppily calculated example. In this moment, the *Grundrisse's* form begins to echo its object: Marx perseveres in his mathematics even though this effort will inevitably come apart, much as the successful workings of capital will always eventually lead to its own damage. And here, our contradiction: it is in these moments of failure – when Marx makes an error (which he does frequently), when capital causes its own demise (which it does by definition and with necessity) – that recommencing is made possible. Crisis, somehow, begets persistence.

My primary conceptual interest in reading Marx is to ask after the ways in which the body is formalized in and evaluated by the processes of capital. Indeed, informed by my *Grundrisse* reading, I find it very tempting and thrilling to make a provocative claim like: labor invented the body. This is not to deny that the body existed before wage labor, but rather to turn our attention to the process by which capitalist production's fundamental requirement of living labor, and the status of surplus labor as creator of value, simultaneously produces and presupposes a now-dominant epistemology of the body: an instrumental account which understands the body as the site of and container for a discrete and quantifiable amount of capacious action. In short, this is a theory of body-as-capacity. Marx asserts that because, in bourgeois capitalist production, unlike in systems of serfdom or slavery, the worker is (even if only formally) a *free* worker, who sells his labor to the capitalist as an equal agent in the process of exchange, it follows that “the totality of the worker's labour capacity appears to him as his property, as one of his moments, over which he, as subject, exercises domination, and which he maintains by expending it.”<sup>5</sup> Since this labor-capacity of the worker is now realizable as property, and given that this labor-capacity exists only as potential within the body, the physical body itself materializes as property of the worker. To have a body within the regime of wage labor is to own one's own body, a body which is an object of more or less value insofar as labor-capacity comprises one form of value in which the posited value is located in the body, not yet realized as money. In an attempt to make sense of the differentiation – the more or lessness – of such potential, I turn to Marx's formulation of the “dialectical inversion of the right of property” under capitalism, by which the capitalist gains the right to appropriate alien labor while the worker is obligated to relate to his capacity as alien from himself.<sup>6</sup> Thus, capacity, alien to the worker who nonetheless owns the body that realizes it, is now instantiated as a discrete entity available to various modes of cultivation.

Marx is careful to assert that the freedom of the wage laborer is merely formal: neither liberatory nor egalitarian, this formality guarantees only the freedom to be exploited. The confrontation between capitalist and worker, insofar as the appropriation of surplus labor is a presupposition of capital, can only ever go one way. The process by which the worker's formal freedom produces labor capacity as a discrete thing located in the body, enables a double exploitation of the worker in his exchange with the capitalist. It is not enough that the capitalist is, in his role, always appropriating quantities of labor capacity beyond that for which he provides compensation in wages. Indeed, the cultivation and maintenance of capacity, even before exchange has taken place, insofar as it has been formalized as contiguous with his very flesh, becomes the responsibility – the liability – of the worker.<sup>7</sup>

If capacity is a liability, how is this capacity cared for? How is it built, maintained, and measured? Moreover, how does the notion of an operative bodily capacity, always ready to be converted into a measurable quantity of labor power, shape the field of discursive meaning to which our bodies are beholden? I approach these questions by turning to a 2011 durational performance entitled *Cuts: A Traditional Sculpture*. Personal trainer, body builder, and performance artist Cassils describes the piece as follows:

Over 23 weeks I built my body to its maximum capacity. I did this by adhering to a strict body-building regime constructed by master bodybuilding coach Charles Glass. David Kalick, a nutritionist specializing in diets for sports competition, designed a diet where I consumed the caloric intake of a 190-pound male athlete. I also took mild steroids for eight weeks of the training.<sup>8</sup>

Devised while serving as an artist-researcher under the auspices of Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibition's *Los Angeles Goes Live: Performance in Southern California 1970–1983*, Cassils frames *Cuts* as a reinterpretation of Eleanor Antin's *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture* (1972) and its companion piece *Lady Face Man Body* as an homage to Linda Benglis's *Advertisement* (1974). Cassils explains: "I wanted my new work to interpret these feminist pieces, which take on gender, power and the body. I project these works into a context exploring what it is to be transgendered in today's society."<sup>9</sup>

I am interested in reading *Cuts* as an athletic performance, in which the term *athletic* functions not only as a description of physicality, but names a specific genre of performance that offers unique insight to a Marxian account of living labor. While plays, dance performances, live art, and musical concerts might all be reductively defined, like an athletic event, as bodies doing things on display, the centrality of quantification is unique to the athletic. That is, I propose the athletic as a mode of performance that is first and foremost concerned with the explicit and intentional measure of bodily capacity. Without denying the pervasiveness of the theatrical rituals and aesthetic codes that govern formal sporting practices and other athletic endeavors, there is no athletic without numbers: speed, height, distance, points. Investing in the centrality of measure permits an understanding of athleticism as a mode of inquiry, and a means of gathering data about bodies in order to render them knowable. Moreover, in the athletic paradigm, there is always a winner: this collection of data is always already participating in the production of a hierarchy of value in which certain bodies are positioned as objectively more valuable than others.

The athletic is the organizing principle of formal sport and exceptional virtuosity, yet within post-industrialism the athletic seeps outwards, encroaching on the quotidian. Its logic is something that many of us, even those of us who could not be further away from considering ourselves sportif encounter with increasing frequency on an ordinary basis, given the proliferation and of mainstream data-accumulation technologies, programs that track runs and bike rides and visits to the gym, apps that tell you how fast you were moving at each moment, how many pages of Marx you read in the past 24 hours, how many times you opened your refrigerator door, and how many steps you took today. These are apps that create graphs of "effort" and track "best performance" compared to yourself and others. Such technologies respond to (and reproduce, to be sure) a capitalist appetite for data accumulation that promises to deliver more, better, faster. However,

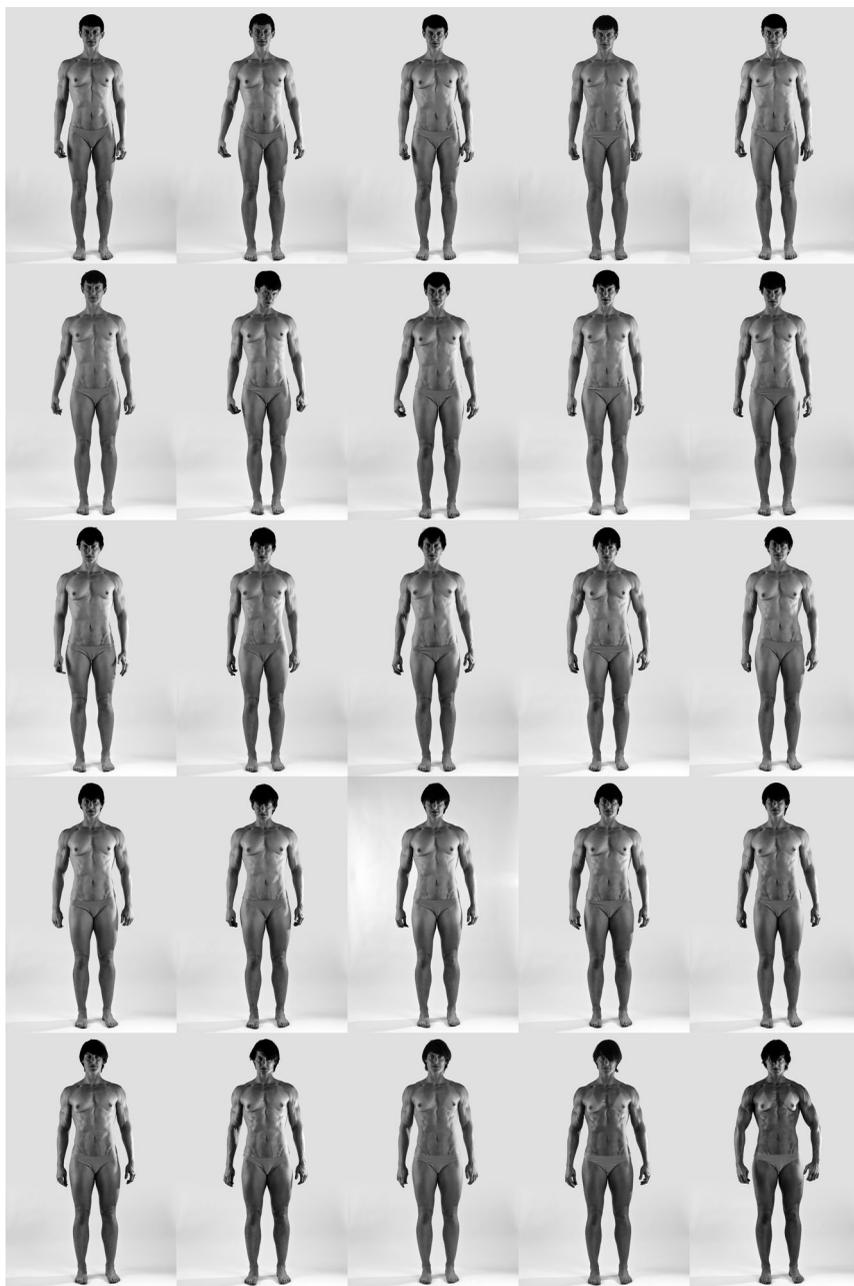


Figure 1. *Time Lapse (Front)*, 2011. Part of the six-month durational performance *Cuts: A Traditional Sculpture*. c-print, 60×40 inches.

Source: Cassils. Image courtesy of the artist and Ronald Feldman Fine Arts. © Cassils 2011.

they also lead to a kind of epistemological gap, whereby the excess of increasingly precise data paradoxically comes to evacuate an ontological account of bodily capacity itself. Beyond a collection of numbers, what does it really mean to say that a body's capacity has been increased, has been cultivated? What can that body do, or: what can that body now do better?

In Cassils's September 2013 gallery show *Body of Work* at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts Gallery in New York City, the video and photographic materials documenting the six-month span of *Cuts* were presented alongside a number of Cassils's other works, that, like *Cuts*, serve to unmoor the demands of heteronormative sex-gender schemata. Encountered all at once in *Body of Work*, there is no doubt that Cassils's oeuvre brilliantly renders the fictiveness of gender as a somatic-semiotic system<sup>10</sup> comprised of acts of doing as well as being done to. In *Cuts*, the bounded, durational process of building a body destabilizes the hegemony of normative gender by producing the remarkable co-presence of a virtuosic masculine musculature manifest on a putatively female body; *Cuts*'s companion piece, a magazine collaboration with photographer Robin Black entitled *Lady Face Man Body* even more explicitly stages visually "incoherent" gender, suturing together hyperfemininity and hypermasculinity in a series of highly stylized, pin-up portraits of a shredded Cassils.

Yet, in encountering Cassils's body-as-art-object and grasping the contours of its semiotic condition, I suspect that it is all too easy for the viewer to become the knowing gaze who masters precisely what she sees. I worry that this kind of representational encounter – what Fred Moten calls a "mode of semiotic objectification and inquiry that privileges the analytic-interpretative reduction"<sup>11</sup> of materiality into meaning – risks foreclosing a differently oriented engagement with the work that might be better equipped to account for, or simply be with, the muscle of the work, of the piece, of the body. Instead of perceiving *Cuts* as the durational representation of a body's gendering, I suggest that the work enables an understanding of gender as always already the cultivation of material capacity that is made, unmade, and remade in perpetuity.

In *Cuts* the rigorous and intentional cultivation of body armor lodges Cassils within several simultaneous strata of subjectification. The piece makes a mockery of mainstream body building of quotidian systems of discipline, and of the modern regime of individual responsibility, the system of knowability in which the body can only be an independent and discrete entity, capable of actions that render it – through its own sheer force – more desirable and more valuable, under capitalism. Within athletic performance, bodily capacity becomes meaningful through systems of measure: athletic formalism functions biopolitically in its attempt to contain the anxiety produced by the threat of radically unknowable raw physical capacity, subsuming the body's movements into predetermined categories of legibility that are in turn mediated and consumed as spectacle. *Cuts* inhabits the regime of athletic quantification askance: though Cassils did measure weight gain and document their body's changing appearance over the course of the performance, the artist did not set out with an explicit quantitative goal ("to produce a body which can do X") but instead was guided by the diffuse and intangible notion of arriving, eventually, at the point of the body's "maximum capacity." Cassils's project delimits not a distance but rather a direction, and in so doing engages a system of non-teleological measure. The stated structure of the project begins to sketch out a map and dares to ask where – in the pursuit of maximum capacity – a body might go.

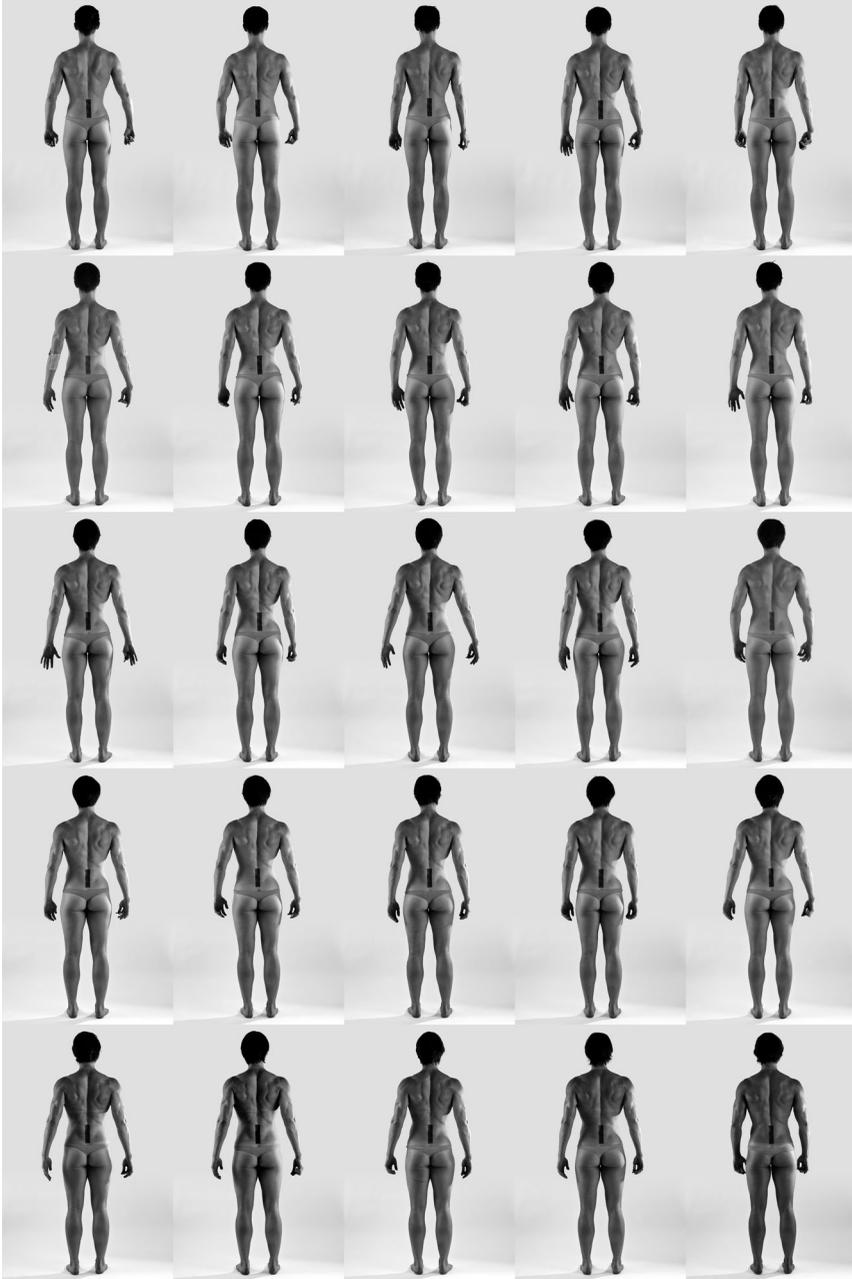


Figure 2. *Time Lapse (Back)*, 2011. Part of the six-month durational performance *Cuts: A Traditional Sculpture*. c-print, 60×40 inches.

Source: Cassils. Image courtesy of the artist and Ronald Feldman Fine Arts. © Cassils 2011.

In the video component of the work, *Fast Twitch//Slow Twitch* (2011) – presented as a two-channel installation within a gallery context, and widely available in a pared-down format YouTube<sup>12</sup> – an uncanny vibrancy becomes manifest as Cassils’s body, in time-lapse footage, shakes with instability, these micro-gestures alive and twitching. The video does not end with a static image of an impressively built body. There is no unveiling, no “Ta-da!” moment. Instead, the footage ends with an extended close up of Cassils’s face, dwelling too long for comfort and made strange by the effects slow motion. This face, eyes dull, grimaces under the immense effort of exertion (out of frame, Cassils’s body “maxes out,” a term which, in weight-lifting parlance, means to lift at the absolute high end of one’s strength threshold) before finally falling back into an inverted slackness.

In denying a linear before-and-after visual narrative, this video reminds us that Cassils’s project enacts a mode of building a body that is about something other than a legible product or an end result. Instead of producing an infallible, muscled edifice, *Cuts* opens the possibility of a non-linear kind of building, composed of disjointed motions and speeds, that simultaneously composes and undoes itself: a body coheres only to fall apart. But without a before-and-after, and without a product, how do we – how does Cassils – know when the point of maximum capacity has been attained?

Capacity is also a tricky concept, deceptively and especially difficult to think of in relation to bodies. For those who read and write within affect studies, the frequent repetition and reiteration of Spinoza’s phrase – “the capacity to affect and be affected” – risks ascribing a certain hollowness to capacity, but a careful reading of this phrase highlights the trickiness of a word that moves in two directions at once. Capacity, invoking capability, is the potential ability to perform, or simply *to do*, some kind of skill or action. It also refers to the ability to receive and to contain; in common language, we frequently use capacity to refer to the maximum amount or quantity (say, of persons) that can be contained by a given object (say, a room). Yet either way we use capacity, in its active sense or in its passive sense, it is simultaneously both: note that Spinoza does not say “the capacity to affect *or* be affected.” The boxing dyad exemplifies this double valence beautifully; a boxer’s capacity is comprised of her ability to strike her opponent *and* receive her opponent’s blows, showing us that capacity always entails a set of relations. Thus, framing my analysis of Cassils’s athletic performance within the terms of bodily capacity serves to invoke both the force of the artist’s bodies in kinetic action as well as the objectification of that bodies as a container for value, simultaneously highlighting the Janus-like relationship between a body’s *puissance* and its vulnerability.

In “Prognosis Time: Towards a Geopolitics of Affect, Debility and Capacity,” Jasbir Puar demonstrates capacity’s reliance on its inverse on a geopolitical scale: capitalism, to maintain its own demand of living labor, needs throw-away bodies, “bodies whose debilitation is required in order to sustain capitalist narratives of progress.”<sup>13</sup> Puar’s call to account for social identity not as an intrinsic, essential bodily attribute but through a framework of the distribution of risk a useful rejoinder to queer and feminist Marxist scholarship that posits the production of coherent identity categories as a means of somatic stratification that emerges from the differential distribution of capacity across kinds of bodies rendered more or less valuable to capitalist production.<sup>14</sup>

So too on the micro level is a contiguity between capacity and debility, a finite point at which one becomes the other. This threshold is, I argue, realized in *Cuts*. In the written

account of the piece, Cassils reports feeling empowered and invigorated by an increasing muscular strength. But more than that, Cassils recalls:

I also felt like shit. I was so tired all the time from all the heavy lifting. My joints ached constantly, and my muscles became so tight that my girlfriend had to take my t-shirt off at night because I was no longer flexible enough to do so myself ... injury was imminent, and though I managed to stop before it got too bad, it was just a matter of time before I was limping around with buckled knees like all the other bodybuilders. I stopped this project on July 27. On this day I stopped the creatine and the steroids. I stopped force-feeding myself, and I took two weeks off the weights. Within 14 days I had shed eight pounds of muscle. My skin grew thick as the testosterone withdrew from my system. My moods swung.<sup>15</sup>

In *Cuts*, Cassils builds a body, viciously, until that body cannot go on. Ironically, this is where we can finally locate the elusive point of *maximum capacity*: precisely where the body's force is overwhelmed by the threat, and the fact, of its impending debility, where the difference between food and poison becomes completely indiscernible. As it turns out, this arbitrary zenith, the point of maximum capacity, is quite a dangerous spot: the body can only be made strong as it approaches proximity with the forces of its decomposition.

This should come as no surprise. Marx makes clear that, paradoxically, the continuous success of capital depends on its own failures. In a particularly dramatic passage of the *Grundrisse*, Marx writes:

Hence the highest development of productive power together with the greatest expansion of existing wealth will coincide with depreciation of capital, degradation of the labourer, and a most straitened exhaustion of his vital powers. These contradictions lead to explosions, cataclysms, crises, in which by momentous suspension of labour and annihilation of a great portion of capital the latter is violently reduced to the point where it can go on.<sup>16</sup>

Thus, under the tyranny of its ever-expanding spiral, capital is required – from time to time, these occasions becoming ever more frequent – to destroy its contents in order to maintain its form. We might say: just as capitalism requires its own destruction, capacity requires its own wearing out and using up. By this formulation, the kind of capacity disintegration present in *Cuts* cannot serve as a means for the undoing of capital, given that capital undoes itself while continuing to survive its own destruction. Yet, the passage cited above continues with a prophecy, that these “regularly recurring catastrophes lead to their repetition on a higher scale, and finally to [capitalism’s] violent overthrow.”<sup>17</sup> Marx insists that the dramatic, violent crises that constitute capitalism’s *raison d’être* will, eventually lead to its demise. But where is the point of distinction between the self-destruction that allows for regeneration, and the death that finally kills?

In *Cuts: A Traditional Sculpture*, the building of a body is not a triumphant act, but rather a process that is both temporary and risky. A body coheres to come apart, capacities are cultivated only to disintegrate. Cassils’s piece suggests that, within a capitalist framework, the bodily capacities that are not exhausted by capital in the production and consumption cycle are otherwise ruined outside of it, yet ruined still in the name and service of capitalism.



Figure 3. *Shirt Rip*. Video still from the two-channel installation *Fast Twitch//Slow Twitch*, 2011. Part of the six-month durational performance *Cuts: A Traditional Sculpture*  
 Source: Image courtesy of the artist and Ronald Feldman Fine Arts. © Cassils 2011.

To close, I propose a shift away entirely from an instrumental understanding of capacity as the ability to perform labor. After all, drawing from Yann Moulier-Boutang, the collective authors of *Escape Routes* aver that “labour as an identifiable individual capacity is a fiction.” Within the Italian workerist genealogy of Marxist theory, the notion of the worker selling labor *as such* is itself merely an illusion of the wage system: “What is sold is not individual capacities to work but rather a social, collective power that is able to set the capital relation in motion.”<sup>18</sup> Fred Moten and Stefano Harney present a qualitatively different account of capacity that shifts focus away from the individual body and can perhaps be mobilized to repair or steal back from capitalism the social relations it has appropriated. They write:

There’s a touch, a feel you want more of, which releases you. The closest Marx ever got to the general antagonism was when he said “from each according to his ability, to each according to his need” but we have read this as the possession of ability and the possession of need. What if we thought of the experiment of the hold as the absolute fluidity, the informality, of this condition of need and ability? What if ability and need were in constant play ... This feel is the hold that lets go (let’s go) again and again to dispossess us of ability, fill us with need, give us ability to fill need, this feel.<sup>19</sup>

In the pursuit of a mythical maximum capacity, the *puissance* of Cassils’s body is exhausted. What does it mean to be incapacitated by virtuosity? The programmatic wearing out of Cassils’s body – the diminishment of its capacity to do things that might be legible as labor, and even the increasing difficulty of basic quotidian tasks (taking off the t-shirt) – opens into another kind of capacity, an unquantifiable and potentially infinite form of social relation that moves fluidly between ability and need. Unlike feats of athleticism, need cannot be measured. Reliance is a tireless capacity.

#### Note on contributor

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*Capacity*, spans performance art, feminism, elite sport, and post-industrial fitness cultures in order to theorize the training of bodies and subjects – and the accumulation of value therein – under the conditions of neoliberal capitalism.

## Notes

1. Marx (1993, 373–4).
2. Ibid., 377.
3. Ibid., 377.
4. Marketed in English as simply *Grundrisse*, Marx's *Grundrisse der Kritik der Politischen Ökonomie* [Outlines of the critique of political economy] is an exhaustingly long and at times frustratingly repetitive – though beautifully paratactical – unfinished manuscript laid aside in 1858. It was not published until 1939 and the first English translation was made available in 1973. For more on the impact of this translation on Anglophone Marxist theory via the Birmingham school of cultural studies see Wise (2003).
5. Ibid., 465.
6. Ibid., 457.
7. Just as capital appropriates the worker's labor, so too it subsumes the non-working hours. Marx writes: "The saving of labour time [is] equal to an increase of free time, i.e. time for the full development of the individual, which in turn reacts back upon the productive power of labour as itself the greatest productive power ... Free time – which is both idle time and time for higher activity – has naturally transformed its possessor into a different subject, and he then enters into the direct production process as this different subject." Ibid., 711–12. Capitalism produces individuals only insofar as individuals serve capitalism.
8. Cassils (2016).
9. Ibid.
10. I use this term following Paul B. Preciado, who deploys "semiotic-somatic system" as well as "somatic fiction" as shorthand in referring to a structure of social valuation that is simultaneously experienced materially in, on, and by the body (i.e. race, sex-gender). See Preciado (2013).
11. Moten (2003, 63).
12. Cassils (2011).
13. Puar (2009, 161–72).
14. For more on the relationship between a Marxian notion of labor capacity and social identity, see Floyd (2009). "Lukács emphasizes, for example, the way in which specialized knowledges reify bodily attributes: the scientifically managed factory, in his analysis, reifies not only the body's capacity for labour but skill itself. The factory expropriates, disembodies, and reifies the very technical knowledge of the production process. With the emergence of this regime of sexual knowledge [the 20th century, psychoanalytic regime], sexual desire is also reified: *a bodily capacity is epistemologically abstracted in the form, for example, of qualitatively new heterosexual and homosexual subjectivities*" (p. 24). Emphasis added. See also Federici (2004), for a detailed account of the process by which maleness and femaleness come to be socially meaningful as productive and reproductive labor respectively in the capitalist regime.
15. Cassils (2016).
16. Marx (1993, 750).
17. Ibid., 750.
18. Papadopoulos, Stephenson, and Tsianos (2008, 206).
19. Harney and Moten (2013, 99).

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## Pulses from the multitude: virtuosity and black feminist discourse

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Using a dialogic format this conversation between two authors uses political theorist Paolo Virno's conception of the "multitude" to examine and compare two different arenas of black feminist protest that took place on social media in the latter half of 2013. As a performative article, it offers historical and theoretical background to the terms "multitude," "public intellect," and "virtuosic labor" in racialized capitalist formations, situating them to provide an alternative to the power of the State – an alternative that unlike the State does not claim to confer rights. The article looks at the Facebook response to a call from the Crunk Feminist Collective to white feminists to speak out on the verdict exonerating Trayvon Martin's killer and offer counter images to those that describe Martin's killing as justified. It then looks at the public dialogue around the applicability of the term "feminism" to Beyoncé's self-titled "visual album." Through aesthetic inquiry, the authors look at the form these examples of protest take to situate and propose the active viewing of these aesthetic forms by others on social media, as well as by the authors of this article, as a kind of virtuosic labor. The article concludes with a series of poems created using the "cut-up" technique designed to transmit feeling through subjective action and a task manifesto for white feminists to use as a guide.

**Keywords:** Black feminism; feminist theory; critical race theory; Marxism; Italian political theory (Virno); aesthetics; queer theory; popular culture; social media; labor; police studies; racial violence; materialism; whiteness; Crunk Feminist Collective; Beyoncé; Trayvon Martin; Renisha McBride; Jonathan Farrell; Jordan Davis; Michael Brown; Sandra Bland; Tamir Rice; Miriam Carey; Tanisha Anderson; Eric Garner; Yvette Smith; Shelly Frey; Darnisha Harris; Malissa Williams; Alesia Thomas; Philando Castile; Shantel Davis; Sean Bell; Kendra James; Rekia Boyd; Shereese Francis; Raynette Turner; Amadou Diallo; Aiyana Stanley-Jones; Tarika Wilson; Alton Sterling; Kathryn Johnston; Ralkina Jones; Ronald Madison; Alberta Spruill; Kendra James; Yvonne Smallwood; Aura Rosser; Eleanor Bumpurs; LaTanya Haggerty; Kindra Chapman; surplus

This project came out of an email exchange between the two of us while reading Paolo Virno's book, *A Grammar of the Multitude* (2004) in the spring of 2009. Our focus was in using his concept of the multitude as a tool for describing contemporary images of

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revolutionary practice. Rather than attempt to explain Virno, or to say something about his work, the dialogic format of *this* article is intended to highlight the plurality of the multitude that persists as such in black feminist discourse, that does not unify nor converge into a representable One (21). There have been three versions of this project in presentation form prior to the current one that each, in their own way, uses the concept of the multitude to think through the ambiguity of contemporary images of those who have gathered, converged, or presented themselves as something that matters.

Rather than a political success or failure, the Paris 1968 student protesters who formed a backdrop for *Grammar* exemplify the work-without-end-product of individuation. This particular conversation examines forms of protest enacted by the spectator within black feminist social-media spheres, a figure comparable to the French students and their supporters in the difficulty they present to cultural critics in assessing their agentic political value (see Žižek 2009; Baudrillard 1981; Rancière 2011). Does protest matter if no change occurs as a result of it? The contemporary examples of protest that we discuss here, around the murders of Trayvon Martin, Renisha McBride, Jonathan Farrell, and Jordan Davis and around Beyoncé's "visual album," focus on the immaterial labor that is constantly re-valuing images made by black feminists and the black feminist call for white feminist responses, or counter-images, to racialized capital formations. This is not an article on Trayvon Martin or Beyoncé, but rather the black feminist protest that occurs around them.

\* \* \* \* \*

ES: So we return today to start again with a proposition about the multitude made by Sylvère Lotringer on a concept popularized by Virno: "Anyone who cares for the multitude should first figure out what it is about and what could be expected from it, not derive its mode of being from some revolutionary essence" (16). First off, what does Virno mean by the "multitude"? The post-Fordist multitude has a history and genealogy but it is also a new shape of the political and its relation to the State and capital.

MW: Virno grounds his discussion of the "multitude" in contrast to the concept of the "people." For theorists such as Hobbes who were involved in State-building projects, the concept of the people was a reflection of the State where if there is no State, there are no people. It is upon the notion of "the people" that rights are founded. Only in the presence of the State can rights be determined and defended. Without the State, rights are no longer conceivable. For Hobbes, the State's existence, its unchangeable appearance, and its persistence in the face of anti-State efforts were all presumed. Virno describes Hobbes's multitude as a "plurality which does not converge into a synthetic unity." In the multitude, Hobbes "sees the greatest danger of a 'supreme empire'; that is to say, for that *monopoly of decision-making* which is the State" (22). For Hobbes, in its ability to make decisions collectively (regardless of any individual consciousness) the multitude is a threat to the State. Virno's efforts at describing the multitude are important in an age where the power of the State is in many instances subordinate to market forces and when the State is recognized as systematically affording some citizens more rights and protections than others. Virno attempts to avoid the irrationality that led Hobbes to characterize the multitude as a kind of supreme Empire.

According to Lotringer, Virno's relatively more subdued proposition of the concept of the multitude simply "explains a certain number of contemporary behaviors" (22). How can we apply the concept to information we get about political events around the world, particularly political action that is sometimes characterized as revolutionary or with revolutionary potential?

ES: We could continue to look for manifestations of the general intellect and virtuosic labor, the pulse-like movement of the multitude. In our current focus on black feminist discourse, what are the ways in which political events are being discussed and mediated? You were thinking about comments on Beyoncé's late-2013 visual album release and I brought in the feminist social-media interactions on Trayvon Martin and the Zimmerman court case from The Crunk Feminist Collective.

MW: Virno's general intellect is a way of thinking about where all the embodied knowledge that people used to have from the physical practice of doing work is now located. It is where that knowledge goes, that *is* somewhere, when society is advanced enough that people no longer have to work (whether they do or not), because machines can. It is a site that we all have access to. While what is stored in this general intellect may have questionable value for progressive revolutionary struggles, in that its parts cannot be taken as the work product of a singular subject, it holds the potential to be understood as the result of tasks, rather than work, and thus a revolutionary potential to disrupt the hegemony of work.

Many of us are not yet ready to let go of the notion of labor but the capitalist theory offered by Marx and others would certainly be the strong theory (see Sedgwick 2003) that can apparently be used to explain everything. Investigating those shimmerings of how to think outside it is vital.

ES: Yes, where the general intellect, from the Marxist perspective, is techno-scientific knowledge as the linchpin of social (and cultural) production.

MW: The general intellect is what makes rhetorical the question from the cop who has pulled over a black male driver and asks, "Do you know why I stopped you?" It produces the driver as unable to respond or otherwise speak for himself without exacerbating his precarity. It is what contains the black male body as exemplary.

ES: Yes, that performative phrase works as a tacitly gendered and paternalized (patriarchal) tactic of linguistic and physical life pauses (like "stop & frisk"), which are part and parcel of what continues to keep "race" out of legal cases such as Trayvon Martin, Renisha McBride, Jonathan Ferrell, and Jordan Davis. Black male bodies are much more of a palpably gendered threat, whereas black female bodies are still marked as expendable (see Spillers 2003 and Hartman 2008).

So I'd like to bring in Trayvon Martin here and the feminist practices and discourses around the trial concerning his murder (albeit not juridically stated as such, but often written about). On July 16, 2013, the Crunk Feminist Collective on Facebook questioned why white

women were not speaking up about the verdict and called on white feminists to do some work towards issues of race and injustice in this case and address the iterative feminist score of #WhiteFeminismFailsAgain. As a norm throughout waves and history, white feminists held up sex/gender for scrutiny *much* more than other categories such as race (see Spillers 2003; Guckenheimer 2013; Tillet 2013; Ware 1970; Combahee River Collective 2000). The split between gender and race is detrimental and serves to mask both racism and sexism. A lack of connection maintains the “real abstraction” where sociality has corporeal tangibility, where the multitude is material. In the responses by white feminists to the post, I have seen excuses, questions about how to help, a virtual throwing up of hands, exasperation, defensiveness, some “Here-here!” -type agreement, but no white voices that spoke about Trayvon Martin and how the case is important to feminism.

I have not seen any attempt to contribute to the counter-images of racialized capital formations as it relates to the verdict in the Zimmerman trial. And in our attention to counter-images of racialized capital formations, do we mean instances and images that make vital and material how race is an abstraction?

MW: What we might mean is that even while it seems like by definition that “white feminists” wouldn’t be able to say anything to make it better, that we as black feminists still want them to try, and that we are still open to all of us listening together in such a way that might unmake the oppressive power structure of “white feminism.” I’m suggesting here that the call is enough, the content of the responses are only significant in existing as responses.

I am interested in Beyoncé’s visual album, or more precisely, the public dialogue around the applicability of the term “feminism” to her work, given both her claim to being a feminist and the conflicting evidence gathered by fans and critics from her artistic production. This aesthetic debate about the album and Beyoncé’s public presentation is composed of moments of anonymized individuation.

Can comment chains following articles provide a space that both exposes the world with its descriptive content and works as a linguistic form, or have linguistic forms, which were once hidden and now become more and more visible? Can we find Aristotle’s common places in language (the ones we cannot do without) as more or less, opposites, and reciprocity, in these postings? Are there ways we can transform them to enable seeing these abstractions? These distillations?

ES: Exactly, so I scrolled through the comment stream from the Crunk Feminist Collective (CFC) Facebook page and you worked through a comment stream attached to a blog post about feminism and Beyoncé’s visual album to pull them together to look for the possibilities of virtuosity in the manner Virno presents it – a certain kind of labor that is not objectified into an end-product – hoping to gesture at moments when those who posted to these comment streams might be understood, might generate a common of sorts.

MW: We are running these comment streams together through our conversation, suggesting that their tactics of aesthetic judgment and feminist political discourse have something in common. It is both flippant and deeply serious to consider that, in our looking, our

editing and retransmission, we can deprive these words of the uniqueness that would make them meaningful.

Looking at a comment thread to an article on Beyoncé published on the CFC website, is what we see in the feminist discourse in these abstracted and virtual linked bits some of the terror that arises when a public sphere cannot be found despite the massing of physical bodies? This terror is heightened when we account for the nonsense, spam, and vitriol that we can imagine to have been removed by moderators. Or is what we see a public sphere itself? A public sphere which works, in the words of Lotringer, as a “communism, both as a vaccine, preventing further escalation, and an incentive to go beyond [Capitalism’s] own limitations” (15). The concept of the State, its coherence, is maintained through revolutionary narratives. How does social media, its availability, work both to help us imagine that something has been accomplished, and to move in ways that deconstruct the possibility of accomplishment? Is it possible to see *both* the terrifying and the predictable in these utterances?

Surrealist poets created poems using chance, with techniques such as drawing words from a hat and placing them one after the other in such a way that action was isolated and celebrated. Order was randomly generated thereby downplaying any sense that the work was the result of artistic genius or intention. With these techniques surrealists focused less on expression of an idea and more on reader reception – how reading a poem created this way could jolt them from habits of thought and movement. In the 1960s William Burroughs named a variation on these techniques the “cut up technique,” one which yielded a different formal quality relevant here. In “cut up” the poet orders the word scraps. Because the arrangement is not left to chance the surrealist isolation of action in a “word salad” shifts dramatically to the cut up’s *subjective* action.

In looking at the comments and recomposing them I was hoping to pick out similar kinds of movement. Non-referential words and phrases whose meaning could be easily decontextualized, moments of repetition and referentiality between posts, moments of emphasis and punctuational qualifications that emphasize the graphic quality of the text.

As I read, I cut up and reform the text into a subjective poem, transforming my reading experience into subjective action but also into a format explicit in its intention to be expressive of feeling. These poems are *things* created out of images of movement I see in the comment chains. As poems what they offer is more affective than informational. Perhaps this duality helps facilitate the process of seeing social media as both accomplishing something and deconstructing the possibility of accomplishment.

### Thirteen poems for the Beyhive

1

Its about time  
and the beauty of and  
as far as  
me it’s her  
listening

2

SO private  
all of the sudden  
life in ALL  
“new & improved”

3

Called black  
the heck is  
so..!!!.. give me  
Jackson  
one more flake Philly

4

Perhaps you should  
comprehend  
statements

5

I'm trying to stretch  
appropriateness, unapologetic and open  
private (whether  
connection).  
just get stuck  
time deciphering

6

Ya listen  
walking and shouting  
not grown at all  
them, telling them  
watermelon.  
gross.

7

Have  
subjected  
ages  
of  
usually  
over  
anyways  
so, there's that.

8

I love  
I think  
I am  
I took  
I felt  
Other than that, this

9

Agreed!  
Folks!

10

Parallels between  
my 30s, I  
-womanness happening  
opinion  
in the last  
side note  
to/seen  
say about it.

11

Sigh ...  
does not jump squarely  
to the whole  
I didn't. But I don't  
pedestrian and not  
side note: I  
completely

12

be confident folks and trust  
too many (particularly  
too focused  
absorbed  
they can tell you  
but can't tell you

13

awe – but  
bold not new  
is delay what  
most  
more transitioning  
mold. I mean  
LOL) 24 hours

ES: The CFC received over 270 comments to their July 16, 2013 post, with many of them containing dozens of replies. Their original post was as follows:

Calling all white feminists allies: Where are y'all? (looking far and wide) Your silence around the Zimmerman Trial speaks volumes. Six white women (some say five) decided that a young Black man was responsible for his own murder, and they believed that a young Black woman could not be a credible witness. Where is your (OUT)RAGE?! Where is your intersectional analysis about white privilege, that not only calls out the operations of racism, but the particularly gendered operations of racism in the hands of these white women jurors? Where is the accountability? Where is the allyship? Why AGAIN do we have to ask you to show up? It is time for y'all to do the work. Signed, Crunk Feminist Collective.

Manifestos point to a performative call for something different to occur, and that is what I heard in this post. I scanned the comments and replies for specific moments when calls for being an “ally” appeared, mostly from women of color. I also looked for times when white women would say they receive “mixed messages” and they “have no idea” what to do. The doing part stuck out, the task carried out in each post. Many words and phrases were repeated and reiterated – the racial scripts deployed and the types of political investment recognized in their analysis. From the gleaning practice, I compiled them all into a manifesto form.

**Where are the white feminists when you need them? The “Task” Manifesto for white feminists**

**DISMANTLE** The operations of white supremacist patriarchy that occur on a contingent basis, conditionally hinging on determinations that are subject to change depending on ... You get it.

**DISAVOW** Inequality and dependency; competencies and emotional attachments to accuracy, semantics, and tone.

**DISCHARGE** The structures and arrangements of racism that operate in your life and social circles.

**DIVEST** Myths, racial scripts, fears, defenses, gendered and classist forms of racism, and white supremacy as a white feminist.

**DECREASE** The attitude, the over-use of terms like intersectional (say what you see in your own words), the pandering, the playing of the victim role, and the multicultural lies and appropriations.

**DO NOT** Try, kowtow, clutch your purse, colonize, expect a cookie, take it personally, and deny that it is about you and your complicity in a patriarchal white supremacist system of institutions.

**DO**

- Start questioning white women as a racialized class of people.
- Show up and get out of your comfort zone. Take a status risk.
- Read and research. Diversify your news sources. Investigate what allyship means.
- Talk to lawmakers about the importance of social categories in criminal court and review state laws.
- Coalesce. Figure it out on your own. Learn to share.
- Be self-reflexive about complicity in racialized violence and gendered racism.
- Challenge – Where? In white spaces. Challenge the ...

- Racialized perspectives and nuances
- Racializing mechanisms, institutions, and imperatives
- Absence of people of color
- Aesthetic limitations and artistic privileges
- Class, sexuality, and gender privileges – particularly in relation to white men and binary notions of masculinity and femininity

ES: Perhaps our own labor is in excess. The two streams do end in well-known literary forms, socio-cultural accumulated, performative forms: poetry and the manifesto. But we start by viewing and considering the discourse in comment threads, the post by the CFC, which is a *collective*.

MW: Excess, yes, the poem and manifesto could in some formalist way be seen as end products but to do so would discount the lived reality of the difficulty of making a living as a poet, or for that matter, a revolutionary. As a concept, the multitude cannot be broken down into individual actions. I am not one in the multitude, it is indivisible and therefore resigned to (or unfettered in) conceptual space. The story of student protesters in France 1968, the idea of them that is continually reinvoked has a distinctly different quality than their actual bodies. The presumed and named black feminist collective that made the call for white feminists to step up might well be “virtuous” in that it/they engage in “activity without end product” as a collective working together as one in such a way that is plural and “central to the process of individuation” (97), at least virtually.

The online comment threads attached to articles in the various forms of subjective positioning and of public protest that they offer can be seen as a kind of “idle talk.” Drawing this term from Heidegger, Virno asks us to consider that in its performance as merely an expression of the speaker’s self, the “referential paradigm” of language begins to wane. This allows us to consider that what is written may find significance in recognizing someone else’s statement (agreement and disagreement) or as that which prompts the statements of others (imperatives and statements of truth), all performing the tasks of community. One commenter concluded a post on a lack of profundity or lessons on womanhood in the album with a note explicit in its recognition of some of the common ways that comment posts attach to each other. It reads: “I completely disagreed with everything that you commented and managed to do so without being disrespectful, dismissive, or calling names. That seems to be a level of grown woman-ness that may be lacking in some of these discussions about Beyoncé’s album.”

Drawing parallels between comments attached to Trayvon Martin and the comments attached to Beyoncé’s album can delink the sense of the political from Martin’s case and link it to the aesthetic of Beyoncé. As we have made explicit in past iterations of this presentation, images, and the information they contain, can be looked at in non-comparative ways. Eyes closing can be juxtaposed with the closing of border gates, refugees smiling for the camera or each other that seem incidental to a news report on the direness of their condition can be dwelled upon. There is a connection between tasks and affect, especially as you drew tasks out in your scanning of the posts of the CFC Facebook page. Because affect has no scale, scanning for it in the online comment forums allows

access to qualitative representation and misrepresentation, to description. Affect, which can be accessed through aesthetic judgment (“the album fell flat to me ... lyrics were kinda pedestrian”) such as might be applied to a visible album, is not “shaped by lack nor commonsensical dualities of subject versus object or of means versus ends” or with any other characteristics that would allow for comparison (Sedgwick 2003, 21).

ES: These events of self-reflection as labor and surplus are unstable and unfixable, and Virno as well as others, like Tiziana Terranova (2004), locate a pathway to a new kind of autonomy or pattern of the social. Was not Fordism just as reliant on probability and contingency as Post-Fordism? The differences seem to lie in the expanded form and strained medium of surplus and risk leading to new subjectivities. This is why perspectives on practices such as sexuality, gender, and race are being forcibly shifted in neoliberal ways, not in agentic ways really, but in select assimilation-type ways, such as gay marriage and a black President. Because capitalism is the organizing principle in this white supremacist society that appropriates a surplus of racism from racialized practices (Randy Martin qtd in Moten 2003, 109), minoritarian practices might translate as a submission to the socialization of capital.

So where does the moment of agency come in when social life is a thing to be mined for surplus value? Does the general intellect produced in these social and eternally heuristic problem-solving efforts create new patterns at all?

MW: Our own identification of patterns in this mass of virtuosic performance or “work-without-end-product” can be a kind of individuation (54). Work without end product is happening, it is always happening. According to Jean-Luc Nancy, there is always a time before work where community is made. For Nancy, community cannot, by definition, be a product of labor. In order to make this distinction, he calls the things that we do to create community, that come before work, “tasks,” as I mentioned earlier (Nancy 1991, 35). With more than a little paradoxical flavor, Nancy describes the performance of a task as an expression of the *loss* of community, a state that is what is now (what we have in) common. In this sense, what used to be talked about as community is now irrevocably the common. So while Nancy suggests there might be something prior to the inescapability, or strong theory, of work, the expression he offers that we could see as affect seems foreclosed and hollowed out – yet somehow also fundamental and necessary for survival.

ES: Re-working the comment streams into poetry and manifesto contexts exposes the limits of representation and shows the multitude in a sensory and assemblage capacity. There are only certain “tasks” toward that end expressed by women of color who respond to the CFC Facebook post and other responses by white feminists.

MW: As Fred Moten describes it, the lack of division between structure, or definitions, and the agents who make them (i.e., blackness and black people) dissolves the division between subjects and objects in such a way that was only possible because of Marx. Marx, here, is the one who offered a description of (1) value as that which is created through human activity, and who positioned (2) surplus as what might take us beyond social systems within which value attaches to objects/people in ordered ways (i.e., slavery) and yet

where this same (3) value cannot be shrugged off by an individual. For Moten, through Marx, value is that which can be seen, perhaps most distinctly, in the black performance that is an identitarian practice, where subjects cannot not be objects retaining any essential qualities (as a rock retains its hardness), where surplus converges with aesthetic pulse. This convergence is where subjective identitarian practices are made by systems of exchange and at the same time, make those systems possible. The possibility of revolution is located through experimentation at this convergence (Moten 2003, 10–11).

ES: What about Lotringer's proposition that says, "Anyone who cares for the multitude should ... not derive its mode of being from some revolutionary essence" (16)? How is this convergence not doing that?

MW: Ok, sure, the experimental black performance as revolutionary that Moten gives us opens up that question. How about the *possibility* of revolution that we've had to stop hoping for? In this formation, to be black – or participate in the performance of blackness – is something that can be simply "liked" or not (as in on Facebook).

But being invested in the *possibility of revolution* is not the same thing as believing that one's actions will result in an explicit turning over of the State. One can live this possibility; we are living it.

While "practice" as the object of performance studies does allow us to see black performance as this particular kind of utopian practice of futurity, it also "privileges the capacity for production," rehearsing work as what is being done. This is why this particular way of thinking about the black (and queer of color) performance in its exemplary state is never a reflection of what is, but rather of what the world could be if it were a place that supported the survival of these minoritarian subjects. In this way black, or queer of color, performance contains the same aspirational but also paradoxical quality of the multitude. A world that supports black life probably isn't going to emerge but that does not mean we stop doing the things that allow us to survive.

ES: Indeed. We discussed Nancy's notion of "tasks" in *The Inoperative Community* alongside the manifestations from the multitude that we converted into the readily recognizable formats of poetry and the manifesto. Though perhaps as formed objects of study the poems and manifesto delimit, and limit, movement ... What do you think about the valued form of these objects? They may or may not materialize the abundant dispersion of the general intellect.

MW: Getting away from "work" and moving towards "tasks" seems a Sisyphean endeavor. How do we get at an idea of the multitude without imagining that it works for us? That we are using it for a reason? Some of Stefano Harney and Moten's writing in *The Undercommons* (2013) and Moten's essay "The Magic of Objects" (2003), talk about the difficulty for academics, particularly those in the field of Performance Studies, and others who focus their work around practices rather than events or peoples, as having to produce their work in relation to the structures of oppression that academia cannot not be. "Work" as a concept takes on a hegemonic quality. Nothing can be produced outside of structure. The possibility

of agency, or a subject getting something done, can occur only when a hailing structure is taken as preexistent.

In the forward to *A Grammar of the Multitude*, Lotringer parenthesizes a reflection that “[t]he worker’s army didn’t exactly move against the State during May 1968 in France” (12). While he emphasizes a lack of significance in the uprising it makes me think of the earnestness of the protesters as deeply genuine, yet scripted. Indeed, Lotringer seems to celebrate it in his chagrin. They failed, but perhaps like the poster to a comment thread on the possibility of Beyoncé as a proper feminist, who wrote with an awareness of making a public document: “And for the record, I have not & will not be purchasing this album,” their fresh-faced vigor was predictable, and important ...

The way that José Muñoz (1999) describes the survival of minoritarian subjects at the end of *Disidentifications* verges on something that is not work, but I think in a world where being an artist is a vocation, where being an artist allows one to get work that pays the bills (such as teaching) even if it isn’t the works of art that sell, the utopian performance that he describes there stops short of questioning the privileging of the capacity for production. I’m wondering if, in his discussion of performers, many of them white, in his later work in *Cruising Utopia* (2009) – that we could think of as occurring after the material effect of his description of the value, or performance, of critics of color, a description that quite literally enabled the being of those performative writers – that he is able to get closer to what would be a strategic use of aesthetic inquiry as something other than work, something that strives not to reproduce work as all there is ...

ES: Muñoz’s discussion of world making *is* generative. His inclusion of C.L.R. James’s example of an already existing socialist practice can work alongside Nancy’s task of community, while Muñoz is also performing the task of reimagining community. James describes an injured factory worker who is lovingly supported by the other workers around him, who informally shift their own work to hide his injury and compensate for his minimized work level (since he is not compensated for sick leave and must still work). James writes, “‘the fundamental *task*’ is ‘to recognize the socialist society and record the facts of its existence,’” and read them as “outposts of a new society” (James qtd in Muñoz 1999, 197–198, emphasis mine). Other socialist thinkers at the time scoffed at his notions. But Muñoz states that his “dialectical utopianism can tell us something about the temporality of disidentificatory performance” or world making (198).

This is also what I find with the multitude and its general intellect: disidentifying with this world as it stands is the task at hand. Nancy’s notion is similar to Bernice Johnson Reagon’s (2000) discussion of the task of “coalitional politics,” of coalescing. Because it is precarious, it is not easy street. As Nancy illustrates, desires can lead down an ultimately dire and fascist path before one is even aware of it. Even (white) “radical feminism,” in the vein of Shulamith Firestone, can reproduce a certain kind of violent totalitarianism (see Spillers 2003).

ES: What’s noteworthy to me about the Facebook thread is that there *is* nonetheless a certain virtuosity there, by means of virtual communication (on twitter too). Virno talks

about how virtuosity becomes labor for the masses. It's a produced performance, part of the culture industry, that has a certain affective attachment in its mediatization and serialization.

MW: When we move from considering the multitude rather than a People, there is no longer a One, or some group of women, that feminism can represent. Virno's conception of the One and its relation to the multitude is a great tool for retangling race into feminist discourse.

ES: The One and the multitude are both caught up a contested plane of virtuosity, serving the general intellect of "permanent mutability" and a virtual life constantly innovated from the base of that multitudic movement. As Virno explains in his talk, no one ever feels at home and there is uncertainty in that unity – "danger is the starting point," the refuge. So, where do we go from here?

MW: Is the multitude a political labor? Or can it set us in a place outside politics and beyond labor? It is a defining act of the multitude to exit modes of representation. When you say movement, that they speak through movement, I also hear exit.

ES: So, perhaps May '68 protesters just got too wasted and drunk, making collective action, or exit, impossibly feeble. The flashpoint of a protest is too much of a singular moment or event – even in multiple succession – to find an exit.

In another talk with Antonio Negri, Virno says: "We need to think of a situation where human relations manifest themselves as exterior things. We need to think about the things in relations, that is something other than their transformation into relations between things. What is common is exterior" (Negri and Virno 2003). Virno's conception of "multitude" as a new kind of subjectivity that calls into question what we can do, and the practices of the Italian Operaists (who looked towards technology and ways of socializing intelligence) that his writing was in relation to, towards thinking about how communitarian practices could be something other than work. Maybe thinking about the tasks of the Operaists and the kinds of individuation that can occur online make more room for exiting.

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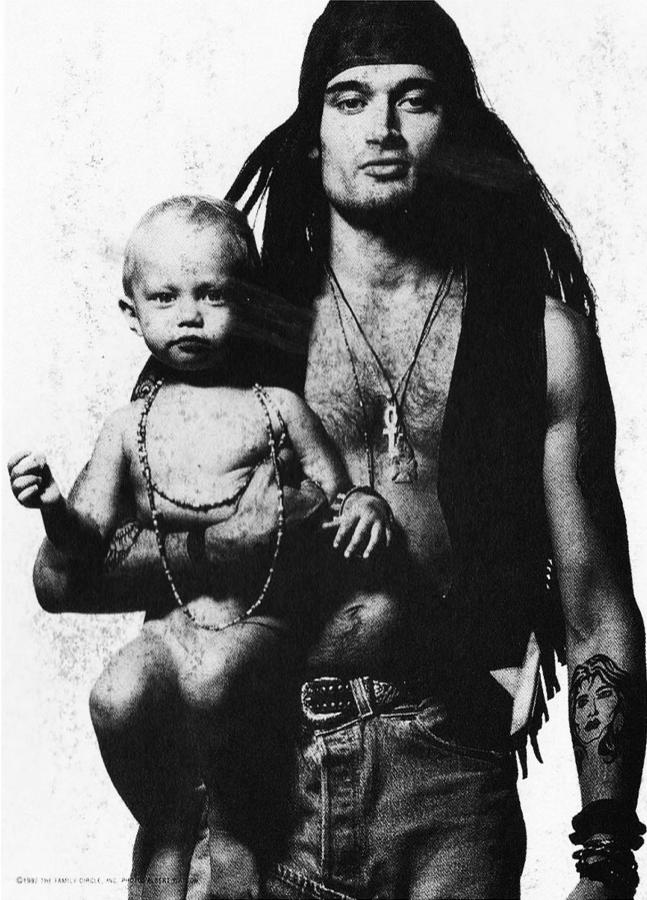




**Dykes**  
were family  
**by golly,**  
before families  
became trendy.

ARE DOING IT FOR THEMSELVES  
SAPPHOS SISTERS

**Dyke Action Machine**



We were just driving along in the family bandwagon and

**suddenly** everyone else jumped on.

EVERYTHING  
COMES FULL CIRCLE  
**FamilyCircle**

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Dyke Action Machine!, a two-person public art project founded in 1991 by artist Carrie Moyer and photographer Sue Schaffner, has had a pronounced visual impact on New York City-based artistic activism over the last three decades. DAM! was one of the first queer interventionist art projects to explicitly address the lived experience of American lesbians. Between 1991 and 2004 DAM!'s wheat-pasted poster campaigns appeared regularly throughout the streets of New York City. Dyke Action Machine! has participated in over 40 exhibitions throughout the US and Europe and, most recently, was included in the ground-breaking exhibition "Agitprop!" at the Brooklyn Museum in 2015.

Throughout the 1990s Dyke Action Machine! campaigns presented a hybrid form of public address where civic issues were packaged to fit seamlessly into the commercialized streetscape. The projects inserted lesbian images into recognizably mainstream contexts, revealing the relationship between visual representation and perceived consumer presence. DAM! performed the role of the advertiser, promising the lesbian viewer all the things she'd been denied by the mainstream: power, inclusion, and the public recognition of identity.

A typical DAM! campaign was comprised of 5000 posters wheat-pasted over the course of one month. Neighborhoods were targeted for both the volume and diversity of pedestrian traffic as well as their long histories as sites for graphic intervention and public discourse. As corporations and activists battled for the ever-dwindling public space in New York City throughout the 1990s, DAM! turned to other modes of propaganda (lightboxes, catalogs, matchbooks, buttons, and stickers to name but a few) and distribution (the US Postal Service, the Internet, and by hand).

DAM's second project, *Family Circle/Lesbian Family Values* (1992), appropriated Family Circle Magazine's ad campaign that featured hip, tattoo-covered fathers as a means of "freshening up" their brand. DAM!'s six-poster project depicted the fluid, chosen configurations of lesbian families in a direct challenge to the reactionary "Family Values" message deployed by right-wing ideologues as well as the mainstream media. Long before the triumphalist push for gay dads and legalized same-sex marriage, DAM! was questioning heteronormative mimicry as a model of acceptance.

Nearly 15 years later, *DAM! Incorporated* (2008) took notice of how lesbians had been both absorbed and fetishized as they have entered the mediated consciousness. Unlike earlier projects that used iconic graphic design or up-to-the-minute advertising as their template, *DAM Incorporated* was based on the annual report, the most bare-bones yet essential form of corporate communication. In it, lesbianism itself has been converted into a viable and, more importantly, valuable commodity based on public perceptions and projections. *DAM Inc.* is a hilarious and indispensable guide to selling out.

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## UNTITLED (LINES BODIES)

Juliana Huxtable

I HAD NOTHING TO SAY  
WHILE TRYING TO GRAPPLE WITH SOMETHING THAT SEEMED SO OBVIOUS,  
OBTUSE, REDUNDANT.  
THE IMAGES, TRINKETS OF OLD NEW YORK  
NAUSEATING TRADEMARKS OF A LATE HUMANISM  
WERE UBIQUITOUS—HYDROGEN BONDS OF “VISUAL CULTURE”  
... A DIZZYING YAWN

THEY CIRCULATED IN MEMORY PLANNED TO PUSH OUT CLIPART PAINT-  
STROKES OF THE RC COLA CAN, BUT FORGETTING THE NOSTALGIA OF A  
FAMILY BBQ.

THE IMAGES SHARE THE SAME BOLDLY DETERMINED FIGURATION  
CIRCULATED POP, QUOTIDIAN, COLLEGE POSTER

THEY WERE EVERYWHERE I DIDN'T WANT TO BE  
SHOPPING WITH MY MOTHER ON CLEARANCE RACKS IN SECOND-RATE  
SHOPPING MALLS, CLUTTERING 42ND ST MANHATTAN ON TRIPS FROM  
NEW JERSEY WITH MY FATHER TO SEE *RENT* AFTER 'EXPLORING THE CITY'

IN BANNER ADS FOR WALL DECALS AND COFFEE MUGS CLUTTERING THE  
ONLINE MAGAZINES I WANTED TO READ IN A PEACE, AWAY FROM FACE-  
BOOK'S POOR ATTEMPT AT UNDERSTANDING MY CONSUMER DESIRES.

LET THEM CIRCULATE IN REINCARNATION, DANCING ON SCREEN SAVERS.

TRAINS AND SIDEWALKS IN THE CITY PROVIDE A CERTAIN *FREEDOM TO*  
UNMEDIATED MOVEMENT  
TRAVEL ACROSS AND, IN AN ACT OF FREEDOM (NO CARS) AND RITUAL, IN  
THE NAME OF PHYSICAL UNBOUNDEDNESS, EVEN IF IN SPITE OF THE POLI-  
CING OF THE SAME,

RECOGNIZE THE LINES IN SUBWAY STATIONS  
HOLDING ON TO THEIR BRICK EMBANKMENTS  
WALKING BY  
FACE UP IN AIRPLANE MODE

INITIALLY, TESTAMENTS TO AN ERA WHERE THE CITY WAS ANIMATED BY  
THE CITIZEN-CREATED PUBLIC WORK ON PUBLIC SURFACES  
(UNCOMMISSIONED).

*HOW BEAUTIFUL, A VIBRANT SPLASH OF COLORFUL OPTIMISM IN A CYNICAL  
AND CYNICALLY DESIGNED CITY*

LINES AND BODIES, CONGENIALITY IMBUED IN THEIR COLORFUL MOVE-  
MENT AND ALSO SOMETHING OTHER ... SINISTER, SARDONIC, AND DYSTO-  
PIC IN THEIR PREDILECTIONS

MIRAGES OF GREETING CARD SENTIMENTALITY GIVE WAY  
AND WITH IT THE BASTARDIZED OFFSPRING OF ART-AS-COMMERCE  
LEAVING BEHIND A VICTIM

REAL EYES IN A REAL CITY-IN-TRANSIT WHERE THE NOSTALGIC LAMENTS  
OF THE LIVING LEGENDS OF DOWN- AND UP- TOWN BOHEMIAS NEED  
LITTLE CITATION IN THEIR JADEDNESS

THE LOSS OF ZEITGEIST AS SUCH / NOTED, REFERENCED *Id. INFINITUM*, WITH  
PAPERWORK TO PROVE AND EXPANSIVE WINDOWS FOR SCALE, IN NEUTRAL  
TONED, CHEAP AND DERIVATE MODERNIST CONDOS

OVER-DISTRUBUTED OBJECTS OF CONSUMPTION SATURATING THE LIQUID-  
DATED MARKETS OF FACTORY PRODUCED HOUSEHOLD ORNAMENTS  
SIMULTANEOUSLY SUPPORTING THE FOUNDATION'S ENTERPRISE AND  
TEACHING ME FUNDAMENTALS OF A VISUAL LANGUAGE CASTRATED OF  
ITS GRAMMATICAL STRUCTURE IN THIS FORM

FIGURES DELIVERED AS SYMBOLS OF A *NEU* HUMANISM

REPRODUCTIONS FLATTENED THE TEXTURES LEFT IN THE TRAILS OF  
BRUSH STROKES AND MERGED THE MOST BENEVOLENT SYMBOLS IN  
THIS LEXICON TO THE MOST IMMEDIATE "ON SALE" MONSTERS OF THE  
NEOLIBERAL ORDER.

AND ELSEWHERE

OUTLINED FIGURES SNICKER IN HOSPITAL WALKWAYS  
DANCE ABOVE PUBLIC POOLS

FUCK FREELY IN MENS BATHROOMS IN WEST VILLAGE BUILDINGS WHERE  
THE PLUMBING HAS SINCE BEEN RE-ROUTED

REMINDE EVERY EYE PASSING BY A CERTAIN ROADSIDE IN HARLEM OF THE  
VILLAINS (AND SAINTS) THAT POSSES THE CITY

CONTINUITY IN THE LINE(S) REMAINS UNBROKEN  
ALL THE MORE APPARENT IN THE LIMINAL ZONE OF A CITY WHERE THE MTA  
CONNECTS THE  
BORDER OF ONE MURAL AT THE STATION OF DEPARTURE TO THE  
FOLD OF A LEG ON MOUNTED FIGURE IN A PARK OUTSIDE THE STATION OF  
ARRIVAL.

IT HAS MADE ITS WAY ACROSS GENERATIONS OF BULBS-TURNED-PIXE-  
LATED CARTOGRAPHY IN ANIMATED SIGNAGE AND IT PROTESTS THE  
RACIST STATE SPONSORED BRUTALITY OF THE NYPD  
TRACING AND DISTORTING THE FIGURE OF MICHAEL STEWART  
FILLING THE FACELESS FIGURES WITH BROWN SKIN AND ARTICULATED  
FEATURES

RADIANT BABIES GROW INTO  
ECSTATIC FIGURES MANIPULATING AND PUNCTURING ONE ANOTHER  
A COITUS PATTERN ARTICULATED BY MOIST HIPS  
UNDULATING LIMBO SPREAD LED JUNGLES WHERE CYLINDRICAL FRUIT  
FALLS  
INTO HANDS MOUTHS IN VEINS  
EMERGES ON THE SURFACE OF SKIN TAUGHT, IN DENIAL

LINE, FIGURES IT GRANTS CERTAIN VITALITIES TO  
A REVELATORY POWER  
THE NATURE OF THEIR WIDE AND RAPID PROLIFERATION  
COULD HAVE FORESEEN LEGACIES AS POOR IMAGES PROMPTING THE CON-  
SUMER OF  
GIFT WRAP ON SALE AT MACYS TO GOOGLE WHO IN FACT WAS  
RESPONSIBLE  
SYMBOLS, DEPLETED KINECTIC AUDACITY  
A SUGGESTION/ MARKER  
INVITATION TO LINES, BODIES TRANSFORMATIONS  
OF EMBOD-*IED* ENERGIES  
IN ON A JOKE / COGNIZANT OF A MISSION  
HOMAGE TO THE  
CURRENT RECURRENT TENDER AGE



Untitled (HM1), 2016, oil, acrylic, inkjet print on canvas and milar, 30" × 40", courtesy the artist and 186f kepler.jpeg.



Untitled (HM2), 2016, oil, acrylic, inkjet print on canvas and milar, 30" × 40" , courtesy the artist and 186f kepler.jpg.

## Radical formalism

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The question of formalism often gives rise to well-rehearsed notions of political indifference, autonomy, and ahistoricity. Yet what if a radical formalism was deployed—against these normative understandings—as a contextual practice and subversive method of critique? Mobilized into action, “Radical Formalism” proposes that institutionalized understandings of form may be hijacked from within as an alternative strategy of resistance. Examining the work of Charlotte Poseneske as one practitioner of radical formalism, this essay offers ways of considering formalist art objects as carriers of the political. By welcoming contextual readings of form, we move past the superficial and facile readings of the relation between aesthetics and politics, enabling ourselves to understand what form can perform.

**Keywords:** radical formalism; institutional critique; active form; Charlotte Poseneske; Adrian Piper; Pierre Bourdieu; Amelia Jones; Juliane Rebentisch; Keller Easterling; Andrea Fraser

Formalism is a dirty word – a bad object – and perhaps this is what makes it such an exciting, yet slippery, site to engage. Plagued by universalist goals of purity, autonomy, self-reflexivity, and political indifference, formalism certainly seems bankrupt. Yet despite the apolitical and tautological rhetoric that surrounds much Anglo-American formalist discourse, is it possible to offer a theoretical and political claim in defense of a new formalism, and what might it mean to conceive of a *radically* formalist practice? What political implications does form carry within our accelerated neoliberal moment, and even better, how might form behave differently today than in the past? The imperative of these questions applies to new directions in critical aesthetic theory, particularly in attempts to imagine form on a grand scale – the form of the anthropocene, of the contemporary crisis in capitalism, of the hyperdevelopment of global cities. All such questions seem to suggest that form is far from an inert and neutral container but a highly charged political and ideological field. Rather than recuperating formalism as a nostalgic project, how might we reframe it as a mode of engagement with the material conditions of our physical world, and reimagine its potential for being deployed “*along side of,*” as opposed to “*rather than,*” other modes of socio-political critique? In pursuing this question, Chantal

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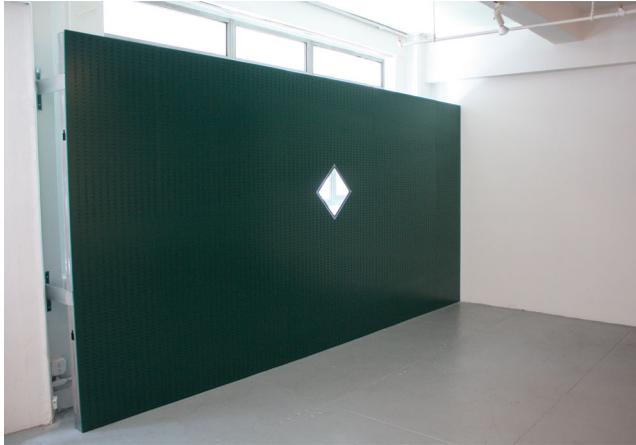


Figure 1. Alan Ruiz. Hunter Green 1390. 2016.

Source: Courtesy of the artist

Mouffe's distinctions of critique as either a "withdrawal from" or an "engagement with" constitute a generative point of departure.<sup>1</sup> If we embrace the latter critical approach, troubling the distinction between form and content by addressing their mutual entanglements and contingencies may perhaps open out, towards a radical formalism that neither fetishizes historical precedents nor abandons them completely in normative Modernist succession. Following Mouffe's call for engagement as a form of *détournement*, I would argue that an effective critique, rather than reactionary practice,<sup>2</sup> can only take place through an intervention within the fixed institutions that we wish to change radically. In proposing the idea of formalism as *détournement*, an elaborate form of disguise,<sup>3</sup> or a kind of counterfeit cultural capital, I'd like to problematize its traditional associations and consider the notion of form as a *carrier* of the political. I will conclude by briefly turning to the sculptural work of Charlotte Posenenske as one example of the operations of a radical formalism. Engaging formalism as a context-specific practice rather than an autonomous and self-reflexive system might offer opportunities for generating alternative forms of resistance and political engagement.

The history of formalism is well rehearsed in the canonized discourse of Western art. In short, the promotion of formalism can be traced through the writings of Adolph Loos (who linked decorative hedonism and superficial decadence with a colonialist imaginary<sup>4</sup>), or certainly Clement Greenberg (who famously advocated the eradication of literary content and mimetic reproduction through painterly abstraction). By the 1960s, however, Greenberg's modernist ideals were under interrogation, giving way to an array of aesthetic practices that reimagined<sup>5</sup>, and at times rejected, the tenets of formalism. The rejection of formalism's obsession with pure morphology and vision can be located in the "anti-aesthetic" and "dematerialization" of 1960s Conceptual Art and 1970s institutional critique. This suppression and de-privileging of vision and form was motivated in resistance to the Romantic mythology of the artist's inner-genius advanced by Modernism, but, more significantly,

visual art's inability to account for pressing real-time material conditions, as well as a growing discomfort with its increasingly commodifiable nature.

Critiques of formalism have also been significant in exposing an overwhelmingly white and masculinist logic. For instance, Adrian Piper has described formalism as a self-enclosed value system informed by a "socioeconomically determined aesthetic" and "Eurocentric" model of education.<sup>6</sup> According to Piper, not only the production but also the very appreciation of form is a field-specific competency afforded by a set of symbolic and material privileges. Furthermore, Piper argues that this kind of privilege "encourages us to evaluate art in terms of [...] line, color, and so on, independently of its subject matter"<sup>7</sup> resulting in "politically-neutral interior-decoration-style high art."<sup>8</sup> Piper's critique is a necessary intervention in both the predominance of whiteness and patriarchy within the infrastructure of Western art history and the ever-growing field of art. A critique we are still learning from today, the work of Adrian Piper – alongside Michael Asher, Andrea Fraser, and Fred Wilson (to name but a few) – offers a necessary critical perspective on the way form reproduces privilege and systems of value. Often these illuminations of the systems of institutional legitimization operate by revealing the way form contains certain raced, gendered, and class-based privileges. While artists that have questioned these systems of legitimization have employed subversively visual positions as their preferred critical delivery method – such as text, appropriation, and performance – form more often tends, in this way, to be occluded by content. What is at question here is not simply whether there is a presence of form in these works, but rather a question of its value in relationship to a work's other properties, and how form plays a profound, and at times unacknowledged, role in our understanding these works.<sup>9</sup>

However, if vision is indeed conditioned by ideology, what are we to do with artworks that provoke visual pleasure? Perhaps an easy response used too often within art-historical aesthetic debates is to superficially dismiss these works as merely "decorative," "beautiful," or even worse "formal," therefore eclipsing any possible readings of critical content. Yet, not only does this position foreclose the possibility of difference, but it also fits comfortably within the normalizing project of globalization. Much in the same way that financialized forms of development bring about cultural and spatial homogenization in its wake, dominant attitudes toward formalism help lubricate the condition for global markets that standardize cultural outputs without yielding a greater understanding of cultural specificity and form. How might we read this presumed position against visuality as, in fact, an ideologically constructed and gendered form of common sense? Art historian Amelia Jones offers an incisive critique of this eradication when she identifies this refusal of visual pleasure as a masculinist project in which "the possibility of a work of art that is both sensual and conceptual, both corporeal and theoretical, both eroticized and politically critical is disallowed."<sup>10</sup> Indeed a feminist and/or queer reading of form might illuminate ways of thinking about sensuality as a subversively critical practice.<sup>11</sup>

On the intersection of art and politics, theorist Juliane Rebentisch has similarly questioned this kind of "either or" categorization. She writes:

[w]hen art, in the name of direct political statements, attempts to reap, as it were, a moral reward for neglecting its formal side, it not only reproduces – for the umpteenth time in history – the bad alternative between formalism and "contentism." Rather, by attempting to

extort its own importance by force of its contents, it risks falling short of the concept of art. Art does not become socially relevant by conveying particular content that could be communicated with greater success and precision by omitting “art-like” decoration – as though form were merely an external addition to such content. To the extent that objects are all experienced as aesthetic, as art, they necessarily always also engender their own formalism, a focus on form for its own sake.<sup>12</sup>

Rather than positioned as binaries, form and content should instead be understood in dialectic tension in that they are each of value only insofar as they exist in service of one another.

Any student of ideology critique will be leery of new regimes that claim to usurp the old while cloaked in hidden forms of domination. Radical formalism is not a totalizing new aesthetic category or style<sup>13</sup> but rather, it might be a process or relational way of thinking. It would be absurd to suggest that an anti-visual experience is more socially engaged or critical by virtue of its aesthetic restraint just as it would be to suggest that all formalist works are political. Yet rather than defining formalism as simply the tautological study of inherent or morphological characteristics, we might refocus our eyes to the social and historical implications form always carries. Following Andrea Fraser, “the institution of art is not something external to any work of art but the absolute and irreducible condition of its existence.”<sup>14</sup> A radical formalism might offer ways of considering the material conditions of our present moment, or as a means of illuminating a work’s institutional frame, rather than only placing a viewer in a kind of aesthetic distance. In this sense we might even evoke Marshall McLuhan’s dictum “the medium is the message” to consider how successful examples of radical formalism might be forms of media through which politics are enacted rather than represented. By welcoming contextual readings of form we enable ourselves to understand what form can *perform*.

Another way of framing this project would be to ask ourselves how might we push formalism towards its own radical ends? What tools might allow us to explore not merely the aesthetic qualities that define an object’s form, but rather its *disposition* and the way it behaves within a field? Pierre Bourdieu defined a field as a hierarchically determined space and a site of struggle containing its own laws and forms of capital where social actors are in direct competition for legitimacy. If we understand formalist production as occupying a specific historical position existing, as Bourdieu writes, “only by virtue of the collective belief which knows and acknowledges”<sup>15</sup> its legitimacy, that is, within its institutional frame, we might be able to use this established position against itself. For instance, I’m thinking of artworks that function like formalist objects yet behave like what architect Keller Easterling might call *active forms*. Easterling says “the designer of active forms is designing not the field in its entirety but rather the delta or the means by which the field changes – not only the shape or contour of the game piece but also a repertoire for how it plays.”<sup>16</sup> Put simply, it’s not just a question of what the work looks like, but what is the work *doing*? If we think of how formalism might be used to produce both material and action simultaneously, we might be able to reevaluate formal artworks as vessels of collusion. In this sense the formal can become a kind of seductive decoy, or switch, that offers a subversive tactic for political action through misdirection. It’s compliance as strategy versus traditional oppositional modes of resistance.<sup>17</sup>



Figure 2. Charlotte Posenenske, Series D Vierkantrohre (Square Tubes), 1967, First configuration, June 23 – July 5, 2010.

Photo: Daniel Pérez

Source: Image courtesy of Artists Space

In proposing a radical formalism, I am not suggesting a wholesale departure from the existing field of art, nor am I advocating for aesthetic complacency. Existing examples of what might be considered radical formalism are many – the inventory is yet to be taken. However, to offer only one, we may consider the work of Charlotte Posenenske whose work and brief position within the field of art challenged normative strategies of both form-making and critique.

Working in Germany during the 1960s, Charlotte Posenenske was part of a group of artists engaging with the serialized industrial procedures of American minimalism. However, frustrated with visual art's inability to directly engage with emerging social crises, Posenenske ultimately abandoned her practice and pursued sociology as a means of studying organized labor and production. She bluntly stated in a manifesto written in 1968: "I find it difficult to come to terms with the fact that art can contribute nothing to the solution of pressing social problems."<sup>18</sup> However, rather than further contribute to the mystique of Posenenske's withdrawal from the art world, I'd like to think about her last works as active forms. In these works created over the span of just two years, called Series D and Series DW, a set of prefabricated units made of inexpensive sheet metal or cardboard could be combined into various simple or complex configurations. Her practice thus was not invested in creating individual sculptures, but rather she created an *operating system* for deploying sculpture. Resembling air ducts or hidden operational fragments of architecture, they seem to beg for function while simultaneously resisting it. Posenenske preferred to install these sculptures in public spaces such as train stations and airports outside of the privatized gallery space that legitimated them as artworks. Their unassuming, utilitarian appearance allowed them to merge with these environments rather than attempt to beautify or enhance the chosen site.<sup>19</sup> And though they subscribed to the minimalist logic of the 1960s,

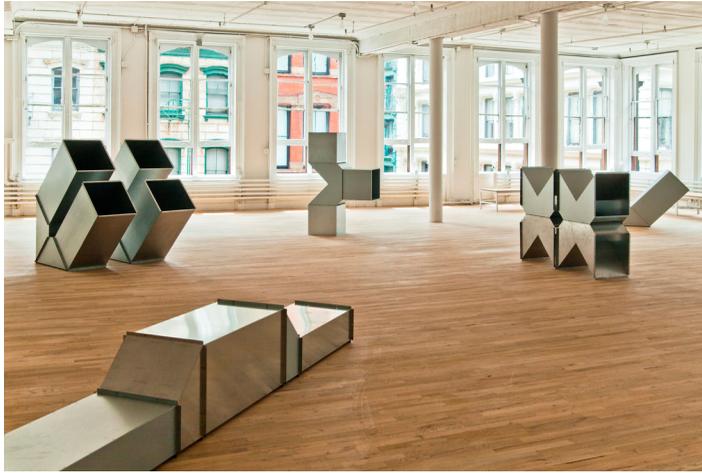


Figure 3. Charlotte Posenenske, Series D Vierkantrohre (Square Tubes), 1967, First configuration, June 23 – July 5, 2010.

Photo: Daniel Pérez

Source: Image courtesy of Artists Space

they behaved more perversely. For instance, as a system, Posenenske's use of modularity de-privileges any fetishistic or auratic reading of these objects. In her manifesto she stated: "I make series because I do not want to make single pieces for individuals."<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, Poseneske left the configuration of these elements up to the collector or curator, performatively implicating them in the labor and authorship of the work, and thus distancing her own role as artist.<sup>21</sup> This radical democratization is underscored by her decision to sell these sculptures at the exact cost of their fabrication, eliminating the possibility of symbolic value. Yet while these works rejected surplus value, they were also largely disseminated through a capitalist market system – like shape-shifting active forms – illuminating the socio-political relationships between industrial and artistic production.

Surely, there are, and always will be, strains of formalism that reaffirm the neoliberal ego – especially where the question of form favors expressive, hyper-individualist practices perfectly packaged through one's participation within niche markets. Yet Posenenske's work articulates a way of deploying formalism as a kind of cultural readymade and viable method of critique. The formal in this sense is not to be understood simply as personally expressive of an artists' quirk, or mystic fetish, but rather as a consideration and cooptation of a visual language not necessarily always authored by its producer. In the case of Poesneske's Series D and Series DW, such visual language might be operational rather than expressive. It is a detouring of the signifiers of bourgeois liberal art from the inside. By hijacking formalism from within, we liberate it from its universalist and liberal goals to account for underrepresented narratives within hegemonic and material conditions. Acting as vessels of collusion, active forms might be useful in challenging the essentialism of identity and for opening up space for social and political critiques that do not rely on individualist practices or a repression of form. Instead we should work

towards a radical formalism that can be used performatively, behaves badly, towards a language we can share, corrupt, and contaminate collectively.

### Note on contributor

Alan Ruiz is visual artist who lives and works in New York. His work explores the way space is produced as both material and ideology.

### Notes

1. Mouffe (2008).
2. Benjamin ([1934] 2008), *Author as Producer*.
3. Scott (1990, 136), "Domination and the Arts of Resistance."
4. Loos ([1908] 1930).
5. The work of the Pattern & Decoration Movement should certainly be noted here.
6. Piper (2011a, 248).
7. *Ibid.*, 253
8. Piper (2011b, 243).
9. Ellegood (2013, 84), "Formalism Redefined."
10. Jones (1994, 27).
11. Mary Kelly's *Postpartum Document* is an excellent example of this.
12. Rebentisch (2012, 264).
13. Recently much has been written about the emergence of "zombie formalism," an undead style of painting generated from resuscitated Greenbergian formulas often seen haunting art fairs. Yet while these critiques of this repeatable typology are absolutely warranted, they are often positioned in relation to questions of the art market, and morphology, which is to say, art's luxury value. See Robinson (2014).
14. Fraser (2006), "Why Does Fred Sandback's Work Make Me Cry" *Grey Room*.
15. Bourdieu (1993, 35).
16. Easterling (2012, 282).
17. *Ibid.*
18. Posenenske (1968).
19. On the history between public art and urban beautification see Kwon (2002).
20. Posenenske (1968).
21. Ironically, however, in many ways, Posenenske's work anticipated the transition from mass-production to mass-customization, a hallmark of neoliberal consumption.

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## Judith Scott's *What is Property?*: an inquiry into principles of dependency, propriety, and self-possession of an “outsider” artist

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The essay addresses the politics of biography in the interpretation and reception of “outsider artist” Judith Scott’s work. Drawing from feminism, disability studies, and Alexander Kluge and Oskar Negt’s *History and Obstinacy* (1981) and its political economy of labor power, the essay proposes a new method of analysis which would foreground Scott’s work as a mode of institutional critique. Kluge and Negt ask “Can capital say ‘I?’.” The essay argues that Scott’s work compels a concomitant questioning of this “I” and the very terms of biography, authorship, and ownership that undergird the myths – and the institutions – of the “outsider” and her “art.”

**Keywords:** Judith Scott; Park McArthur; Alexander Kluge and Oskar Negt; outsider art; feminism; disability studies; living labor; labor power; institutional critique; biography

Obstinacy is not a “natural” characteristic, but emerges out of destitution. It is the protest against expropriation reduced to a single point, the result of the expropriation of one’s own senses that interface with the external world.

Alexander Kluge and Oskar Negt, *History and Obstinacy*, 1981

The artist Park McArthur asks: “Could we consider Judith Scott’s work as ‘institutional critique?’” (McArthur 2015).

In a recent retrospective of Judith Scott’s work at the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum in 2014/5, sculpture no. 27 is distinct in that, as the exhibition label tells us, it is “the only completely monochromatic work [Scott] made” (Figure 1).

In contrast to other works of the exhibition, this untitled sculpture is not bound together with yarn, thread, fabric, and other fibers of bold, vivid colors. It is constructed out of paper towels. Scott recovered the paper towels from a restroom or kitchen at the Creative Growth Art Center, when she temporarily found herself without her usual supplies. The paper towels are pulled, twisted, and tightly knotted together to assemble a complex three-dimensional shape that at first blush suggests a triangular clam of considerable heft. Each knot, and the precise gesture and the pressure of the grip that it necessitated, is accentuated by

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Figure 1 Judith Scott (American, 1943–2005). *Untitled*, 1994. Fiber and found objects, 27×23×17 in. (68.6×58.4×43.2 cm). Brooklyn Museum, Florence B. and Carl L. Selden Fund, 2015.30. © Estate of Judith Scott (Photo: Brooklyn Museum, Benjamin Blackwell)

the taut stretch of the paper that has become more brittle over time, as the sculpture itself has become more impenetrable and unyielding in its closely woven density. Alexander Kluge and Oskar Negt spoke of the significance of the development of the precision grip as a capacity of labor, the gripping of tools, levers, handles, knobs, buttons, and switches, through which the hand had become a sophisticated organ of perception “over the course of a long chain of relays” (Kluge and Negt 2014, 73). They also point to the grip of the midwife as she assists the child’s movement through the birth canal. “Labor,” Kluge and Negt argue, “not only consists of commodity production, but also engenders social relations and develops community. It possesses OBSTINACY. Its product is HISTORY” (Kluge and Negt 2014, 73).<sup>1</sup> And what I would add here is not only the history and community behind – beyond – Scott’s labor of pulling, twisting, and knotting, but also its obstinacy, the persistence of her art, by any means necessary.

My first encounter with Judith Scott’s sculptures was also conditioned by a call for a different mode of critique: a now-iconic photograph of the artist and her work by the photographer Leon Borensztein, selected by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick for the frontispiece to her book, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (2003) (Figure 2).

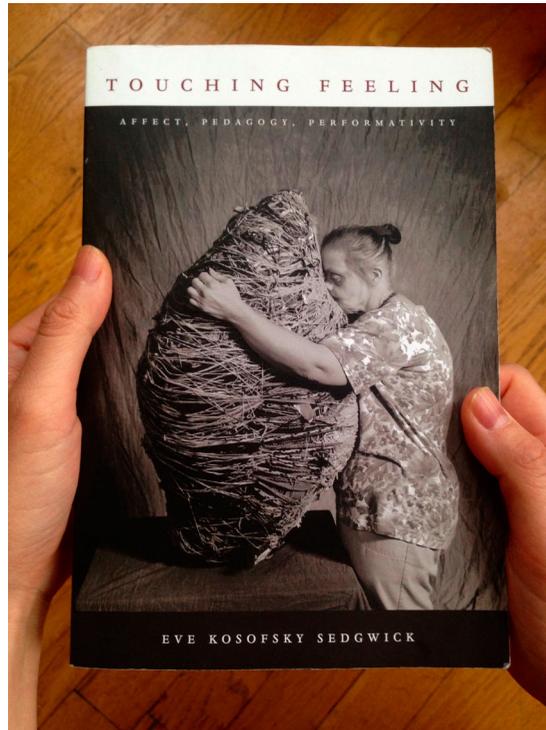


Figure 2 Book cover of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Duke Univ. Press, 2003), featuring a photograph of Judith Scott by Leon Borensztein

In the introduction to *Touching Feeling*, Sedgwick describes how Scott's work functioned as both a catalyst and a model for Sedgwick's book, a work characterized by its "structural recalcitrance" (Sedgwick 2003, 2). The book is a collection of disparate essays that is also "a distinct project, one that has occupied a decade's work, which has nonetheless, and with increasing stubbornness, refused to become linear in structure" (Sedgwick 2003, 1). The writing of the book seems to twin Scott's own method of working: a congealing of a persistent, even obsessional, engagement over 10 years, a process with a gravitational pull towards select objects (in Sedgwick's case, select theoretical texts), which functioned not so much as signposts as bodies of mass ("I'm fond of observing how obsession is the most durable form of intellectual capital" (Sedgwick 2003, 2). And if the writing is a congealing of sorts, it is also a loosening, which accompanies Sedgwick's decreasing sense of definition in her vocation as an academic, an intellectual, and a writer: to hold on is also to let go, so that "ideally life, loves, and ideas might then sit freely, for a while, on the palm of the open hand" (Sedgwick 2003, 3).<sup>2</sup> The completed book then materializes a particular form of stubbornness. And Sedgwick adds in a parenthetical aside, "yes, I'm a Taurus" (2003, 2). This essay will be in part an homage to such forms of stubbornness or obstinacy in Judith

Scott's work – and to Scott, who was born on May 1, 1943 and thus was a Taurus too – from an admiring Capricorn. For we Capricorns are also a stubborn people. And I will return to this stubbornness and its particular implications for perceiving and experiencing the *work* of Scott's work, its mass, its gravitational pull.

For Sedgwick, Borensztein's photograph is significant in the way that it speaks to the relation between Scott and her completed work. Emphasis is placed on the nature of this “and” as neither a proprietary relation nor a relation of linear causality between artist and work, between “subject” and “object:”

For me, to experience a subject-object distance from this image is no more plausible than to envision such a relation between Scott and her work. She and her creation here present themselves to one another with equally expansive welcome. Through their closeness, the sense of sight is seen to dissolve in favor of that touch. Not only the artist's hands and bare forearms but her face are busy with the transaction of texture. Parents and babies, twins (Scott is a twin), or lovers might commune through such haptic absorption. There is no single way to understand the “beside-ness” of these two forms, even though one of them was made by the other. (Sedgwick 2003, 22–23)

Borensztein's photograph of Scott and her work, and Sedgwick's reading of their “beside-ness,” addresses a particularly prominent question that has framed the interpretation and reception of Scott's work as “outsider art”: the challenge and difficulty of mediating between “formal analysis” of the work on the one hand and its “biographical and historical context” on the other. It is a challenge that is not singular to Scott's work nor to Scott as an artist. We can situate the interpretive challenge posed by Scott's work within the continued debates about the politics of abstraction versus representation, of formalism versus realism – as well as with a questioning about the very definition of the political, and the questioning about who has the “right” to abstraction, who bears the burden of representation as if it were a birthmark, every mark but a mark of an over-determination by history, by identity. In the interpretation of Scott's work, the challenge of mediating between “formal analysis” and the “biographical and historical context” is exacerbated by, on the one hand, the thickly textured abstraction and opacity of Scott's work and, on the other, the opacity of her thoughts and feelings as much as they were not spoken nor written, an opacity that seems to be doubly confirmed by the “facts” of Scott's biography, the lived experience of her developmental and physical disability.<sup>3</sup> Judith Scott (1943–2005) was born with Down syndrome. She was deaf and largely unable to speak. She was institutionalized for 36 years, before joining the Creative Growth Art Center in Oakland, CA, in 1987, where she would produce her entire body of work in the following 17 years.

The politics of this biography was forcefully foregrounded in the Brooklyn Museum exhibition, where Catherine Morris, the co-curator of the exhibition, observes that even “run-of-the-mill curatorial decisions,” like from which vantage point to install the work, became the very matter of feminist curating. “Why all this hand-wringing in order to implement these fairly anodyne display structures? And why describe what may be a rather overdetermined process of analysis to get there?,” Morris asks. “Because one of the biggest challenges to presenting the work of an artist whose voice was sharply circumscribed by her life experience is to avoid adding layers of interpretation that can calcify into a narrative fable” (Morris 2014, 11).<sup>4</sup>

*What does the work mean? What does it want of me?:* In an eloquent review of the Brooklyn Museum exhibition, the critic Sarah Lookofsky begins her account with a reference to Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *Little Prince* (1943) and its opening story of a scene of mis-recognition (*méconnaissance*) (Lookofsky 2015). The narrator, as a child of six years old, is fascinated by adventures of "the primeval forest," particularly the story of a boa constrictor that swallows and digests its prey whole. The child draws a simple picture of the snake ingesting an elephant, and asks the adults: "Are you afraid?" The adults answer: "Why would I be afraid of a hat?" They follow up with the very grown-up advice to lay aside such drawings for "geography, history, arithmetic, and grammar." The child stops his drawings and his dreaming: this is a coming-of-age story. And for the now-grown-up narrator of the *Little Prince*, the drawing of the boa constrictor swallowing an elephant continues to function as a talisman of sorts in search of the innocence and wisdom of childhood lost. First, let's consider how Lookofsky underscores her experience of the restlessness of Scott's work as a "shape-shifting between things like hats and processes like boa constrictors swallowing elephant." There is the perception of a morphing from the *being* of the banal to the radical dissolution or becoming of the extraordinary. Noun becomes verb with an absurd, exultant leap in scale. Second, let's underscore our own experience of estrangement, the laughter and the shiver, at this becoming: "What does it mean? what is it trying to tell me? what is it asking of me? what does it want of me [*che vuoi?*]." In the general reception of Scott's work, with a recurring regularity, there is an all-too-quick deflection from "what does it mean?" into "what did *she* mean?" Dare we acknowledge – and linger longer – with our own discomfort, embarrassment, even fear, that this is not *for* me, that it wants nothing of *me*, that "I" might not exist for this work? *Are you afraid?*

In a 2013 interview between Kevin Killian and Joyce Scott, Judith Scott's twin sister, included in the accompanying catalog to the Brooklyn Museum exhibition, there is another moment of an all-too-quick deflection, when we cut from the story of Judith Scott's "asylum years" in Ohio, from the age of seven to her years at Oakland's Creative Growth Art Center, from the age of 43, on April 1, 1987, that is, her "productive" years as an artist:

KK: I'm too upset to go on with the asylum years. Now let's move on to the cheerful part, after you brought Judy to live with you, and in 1987, when she encountered the artist Sylvia Seventy in a workshop at Creative Growth.

JS: Yay! (Killian 2014, 42)

Listen to the modality of the cut. We have approached the part of the interview where we are working through the records of Scott's institutionalization for 36 years, first at the Columbus State School, formerly known as the Ohio Asylum for the Education of Idiotic and Imbecilic Youth, and then at the Gallipolis Developmental Center. The interview conveys the sister's initial horror at reading Judith Scott's records when she became Scott's guardian. The records indicate the violence of the asylum's repeated attempts at disciplining Scott – the taking away of her crayons (because she was mis-diagnosed as "too retarded"), the repeated evaluations that state she was "a bad child," the pulling out of all of her teeth, the numerous application of antipsychotic drugs ("... as pharmaceutical guinea pigs ...") "Yes, just like people in prison"), as well as the disturbing absence for over 20 years of any records regarding Scott. As the facts accumulate, there is an abrupt

shift of direction and affect, a cut: “I’m too upset to go on ... Now let’s move on to the cheerful part ...” The cut is rendered emphatic with an exclamation mark that speaks not only for the interviewer’s relief but also for *our* relief, the relief of the audience, cueing us that this is a story with a happy ending. My aim here is not to query with the ending itself, but rather to linger longer with the movement of that “yay!,” acknowledge *our* desire for a happy ending and how it propels a particular “narrative fable” of resurrection and redemption. The fable is of a “metamorphosis” – as John MacGregor, the critic of *Art Brut*, entitles his 1999 book about Judith Scott. “We can see what most outsider stories actually are,” Hilton Als says, “replications of the Christian stories of suffering, shot through with the dark and light of redemption and belief” (Als 2014). It’s a type of story-telling in which the desire for an ending speaks to a need for deliverance – a deliverance that is also a disavowal.

In a panel discussion that accompanied the Brooklyn Museum exhibition, Park McArthur proposed a question that initially was counter-intuitive: “Could we consider Judith Scott’s work as ‘institutional critique’?” Turning to the aforementioned section of the interview between Killian and Joyce Scott, McArthur emphasizes how Judith Scott’s institutionalization is accounted for not only through the records but also through the *absence* of records: the destruction or withholding of Scott’s records of 20 of the 35 years that she was institutionalized. If institutions speak to and of themselves via the keeping and destruction of records, McArthur suggests in Scott’s work a mode of “institutional resistance” – if not institutional critique – via “a sort of resistant form of living in the institution of Columbus State School and outside of it:”

Instead of baby pictures some people have medical records, instead of home movies some people have diagnostic charts, instead of scrapbooks some people have immigration court hearings, instead of personal diaries some people have future work yet to be done. One of the things that artists do is that they bring the means of producing recording closer to themselves even if this means a production that has to be done by stealing the means of production or demanding it or by taking it by kind of any means necessary.<sup>5</sup> (McArthur 2015)

I’d argue that accounting for such resistance necessarily intertwines with a lingering-longer with the story of institutions, organizations, associations, and the material conditions of Scott’s lived experience, not only for the persistence of the effects of her “asylum years” in her work, but also the work that would not have been possible without the infrastructural and structural support of organizations like the Creative Growth Art Center and family members and caregivers such as her sister. As a mode of critique, such accounting urges a method of seeing, of reading, which (re)discovers the “record” of a life, of lives, in our very perception of the work’s shape, proportion, weight, entwining and clash of colors and textures, movement of binding and unbinding. As we busy our faces with the trans-action of texture, as Sedgwick might put it, we find or rather are found by the “document” of a resistant form of living, which is not so much an expression of self as the art of a particular embodiment of political and social conditions that render some more “disabled,” more “precarious,” than others. “My art is more optimistic than I am. I tend to bitch and complain, but I keep proselytizing,” McArthur quotes from the artist Hannah Wilke.

“I have always used my art to have life around me. Art is for life’s sake. Politicizing its preciousness pleases me” (Jones 1985, 11).

In contrast to a model of determination inherited from idealism, especially from a theological view of our relation to the world, which presumes “an external cause which totally predicts or prefigures, indeed totally controls a subsequent activity,” Raymond Williams proposed that there is a necessity to consider a different mode of determination that is concomitant with the experience of social practice, “a notion of determination as setting limits, exerting pressures” (Williams 1973, 12). Following Williams, the question is not how Scott’s institutionalization defined her (or not), but how her institutionalization set limits and exerted pressures in her work – and how these limits and pressures were embodied as forms of stubbornness, stubbornness that is a product both of her institutionalization as well as of her resistances against it.

Near the end of the interview, Killian and Joyce Scott discuss Judith Scott’s discipline as an artist, drawing attention to her daily diligence, describing a work schedule that had been shaped into the regularity of a typical work-week. Scott, we are told, was “an artist who worked five days a week and six hours a day” (Killian 2014, 43). The interview portrays an artist who not only made work but *worked*. And her sister Joyce adds, if Judy was diligent at work, she was also sociable after work, taking care of those she lived with, enjoying her “downtime” in the evenings and over the weekends. In short, she was “a good worker,” a productive subject. However, the interview, almost despite itself, also hints at a certain excess in Scott’s self-discipline, the suggestion of a difficult and uncontrollable intractability, a stubbornness that could but be stopped with the threat of violence: “She had a strong sense of routine, very common among people with Down syndrome, so during her workday you’d almost have to put a gun to her head to stop” (Killian 2014, 43). *When does the work stop? Does it ever end? Does it have an end, a purpose?*

In Alexander Kluge and Oskar Negt’s *History and Obstinacy* (1981), recently translated into English in 2014, stubbornness is a property that bears a dialectical relation with capital’s expropriation of the senses. Described at times as the missing half of Marx’s *Capital*, *History and Obstinacy* focuses on the development of living labor and the interiorization and reproduction of the logic of capital at the level of habits, desires, gestures, and expressions. As Devin Fore clarifies in his incisive introduction to the English translation of *History and Obstinacy*, it’s a shift of focus shared by others such as Michel Foucault and his contemporaneous lectures on bio-politics, and they reflect a decisive shift in the strategy of capital “from exploitation to ‘imploitation,’” that is, “exploiting the inner resources of the living subject” (Fore 2014, 19). The question is “Can capital say ‘I’?” For instance, there is the long history (of “hundreds of years,” “thousands of years”) of the development and appropriation of “the capacity for learning, discipline, the capacity for abstraction, punctuality” – as well as the repression and atrophy of undervalued capacities and senses. The latter senses, however, do not simply disappear. It survives and persists, as stubbornness. Capital’s expropriation of the senses both produces and is countered by obstinacy, by history:

For every trait that is capitalized, another is shunted aside. As a result, alongside a primary economy of labor traits established through the historical mode of production there emerges

within the human subject a secondary black market economy where isolated from the authority of the ego and capital's logic of valorization repressed and derealized traits take on a intransigent life of their own. (Fore 2014, 35)

In *History and Obstnacy*, there is another story of childhood, not that of the innocence and wisdom of childhood lost (as in the case of *The Little Prince*), but that of a stubborn child from the Brothers Grimm.

Once upon a time there was a stubborn child who never did what his mother told him to do. The dear Lord, therefore, did not look kindly upon him and let him become sick. No doctor could cure him, and in a short time, he lay on his deathbed. After he was lowered into his grave and was covered with earth, one of his little arms suddenly emerged and reached up into the air. They pushed it back down and covered the earth with fresh earth, but that did not help. The little arm kept popping out. So the child's mother had to go the grave herself and smack the little arm with a switch. After she had done that, the arm withdrew, and then, for the first time, the child had peace beneath the earth. (Kluge and Negt 2014, 292)

Kluge and Negt underscore the obstnacy of the child's behavior, its persistence in the diminutive, concentrated form of the little arm popping up again and again, in spite of or rather because of the repeated attempts at restraint. And these attempts speak to the violence of a "primitive accumulation" that functions as a primal scene, repeated over and over again, for the reproduction of capitalist subjectivity.<sup>6</sup> "The discipline experienced by the obstinate child even from beneath the grave is the moral answer to a previously unsuccessful collective expropriation of the senses. Had it been successful, it would not have necessitated persecution that goes to the bone. Such a traumatic horror lasts for centuries in the ranks of society" (Kluge and Negt 2014, 292). Obstnacy then is a form of "protest," which is both the result of and persistence against such expropriation of the senses.

At the end of the interview, Killian and Joyce Scott discusses Judith Scott's habit of stealing in her appropriation of this and that found object, objects that are folded into her weaving, wrapping, bundling, that is, her de-forming of the banal into the exuberance and liberation of the barely recognizable (Figure 3).

X-ray examinations have been deployed to reveal what is hidden within the sculptures, as if the obscurity, the seeming lack of meaning of the work would be answered by a secretive nature. To this particular "narrative fable," this hermeneutics of truth, I would add a rejoinder: let us resist being mother, resist smacking the little arm with the switch, that is, resist the desire to deflect, resolve, and *answer* the question that the work seems to pose again and again. For a while at least. And in lieu of an ending, I pause this essay with a projected fantasy of my own. If the anarchist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon had declared that "property is theft!" in his *What is Property?* (1840), then this "stealing" by Judith Scott is a radical, anarchic refusal of the very logic of appropriation and privation – as well as of the notion of private property that undergirds the sense of property in my *own* self, *my* identity.<sup>7</sup> And let us enumerate here some of the items that Scott's work was found to have swallowed and digested: an ex-husband's paycheck, keys, a wedding ring.<sup>8</sup> These are the very markers of our social reproduction swallowed, remade, rendered uncanny. It is in this sense – via this fiction – that I would like to think of Judith Scott, born on May 1, 1943, thus a Taurus but also born on May Day, as resistant, defiant, and in protest.

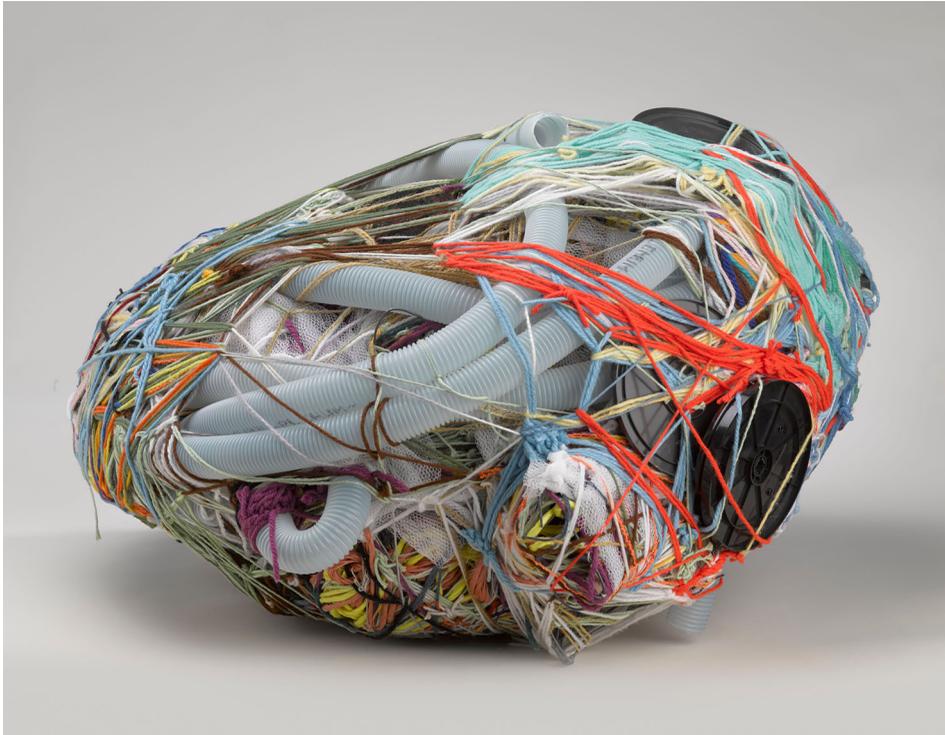


Figure 3 Judith Scott (American, 1943–2005). *Untitled*, 2004. Fiber and found objects, 28×15×27 in. (71.1×38.1×68.6 cm). The Smith-Nederpelt Collection. © Creative Growth Art Center. (Photo: © Brooklyn Museum, Benjamin Blackwell)

### Note on contributor

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### Notes

1. “That precise feeling with which a person in China, Europe, or the United States tightens a screw (‘it fits,’ ‘like a glove,’ ‘it wiggles,’ ‘has clearance’) is a characteristic that all workers mutually recognize, but that evolved over the course of a long chain of relays,” (Kluge and Negt 2014, 73).
2. “I don’t suppose it’s necessarily innocuous when a fully fluent, well-rewarded language user, who has never lacked any educational opportunity, fastens with such a strong sense of identification on a photograph, an oeuvre, and a narrative like these of Judith Scott’s. Yet oddly, I think my identification with Scott is less as the subject of some kind of privation than as the holder of an obscure treasure, or as a person receptively held by it . . . But in acknowledging the sense of tenderness towards a treasured gift that wants exploring, I suppose I also identify with the very expressive sadness and fatigue in this photograph. Probably one reason Scott’s picture was catalytic for this hard-to-articulate book: it conveys an affective and aesthetic fullness that can attach even to experiences of cognitive frustration . . .” (Sedgwick 2003, 24).

3. See for instance John M. MacGregor, *Metamorphosis: The Fiber Art of Judith Scott* (1999). Note the rhetorical turns resorted to in describing Scott's work in this summary of *Metamorphosis*: "Judith Scott, a sixty year old woman with Down's Syndrome, has spent the past fifteen years producing a series of totally non-functional objects – obsessively wrapped, knotted, braided fiber masses revealing hints of concealed scavenged objects, pieces which loom large and wraith-like or sit as small tightly wound secrets. Her works, to us, appear to be works of Outsider Art sculpture, except that the notion of sculpture is far beyond her understanding. As well as being mentally disabled, Judith cannot hear or speak, and she has little concept of language. There is no way of asking her what she is doing, yet her compulsive involvement with the shaping of forms in space seems to imply that at some level she knows. Does mental retardation invariably preclude the creation of true works of art? Is it plausible to imagine an artist of stature emerging in the context of massively impaired intellectual development?" <http://creativegrowth.myshopify.com/products/metamorphosis-the-fiber-art-of-judith-scott>
4. Morris (2014, 11). "There are photos that document Scott working in the studio which, while confirming her single-minded devotion to her craft as well as her sense of humor, offer few clues for presenting the completed object beyond the way she chose to have her pieces sit on a table as she worked. We know Scott turned her objects as she worked on them, but did she prefer some vantage point for looking at them? In some cases, it does seem clear that pieces have a front and a back, but if such a work is largely flat, as are several significant examples, can we hang something on the wall that the artist never put there?"
5. For the discussion, McArthur presented this statement with a slide that juxtaposed the image of a discharge record from Dorothea Dix Hospital in Raleigh, N.C., which closed a few years ago, and an image from On Kawara's postcard series. The discharge record is a facsimile from 1978, with headers and stamps of various bureaucratic departments, and includes descriptions of the discharged patient under the following headers, "statistical information," "brief hospital course," "condition on discharge," "physical diagnosis," "admitting psychiatric diagnoses," "final primary psychiatric diagnosis," "secondary diagnosis;" the record includes one direct quotation of the patient: "I have been trying to kill myself." One of Kawara's postcards is from 1969, and it too has headers and stamps of various bureaucratic departments; it also includes one direct quotation from the artist, "I got up at 4:28 p.m."
6. See Karl Marx (1977) on "primitive accumulation." See also Read (2002). "What 'primitive accumulation' reveals is that there is no *mode of production* without a corresponding *mode of subjection*, or a production of subjectivity. The 'economy,' as something isolated and quantifiable, exists only insofar as it is sustained by its inscription in the state, the law, habits, and desires" (Read 2002, 45). As Read and others question what are the contemporary equivalents of "the commons" that are destroyed and privatized through new and continued forms of primitive accumulation, they emphasize that "it is increasingly the power of life itself, the capacity to reproduce and live, from the genetic code to the basic necessities of existence, that like the feudal commons, is increasingly coming under the rule of 'absolute private property'" (Read 2002, 46). The need then is for a continued and renewed form of protest in and through where we insist again and again "Art is for life's sake. Politicizing its preciousness pleases me ..."
7. Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1840). "If I were asked to answer the following question: *What is slavery?* and I should answer in one word, *It is murder!*, my meaning would be understood at once. No extended argument would be required to show that the power to remove a man's mind, will, and personality, is the power of life and death, and that it makes a man a slave. It is murder. Why, then, to this other question: *What is property?* may I not likewise answer, *It is robbery!*, without the certainty of being misunderstood; the second proposition being no other than a transformation of the first?"
8. Killian (2014, 44). "KK: ... One of the things the general public knows about your sister's work is that she sometimes *stole* things to put inside the yarn; JS: And she would have little treasures. One time someone noticed, before it was completely buried, my ex-husband's paycheck. People would be very careful about their *keys*. KK: In one of the films an X-ray reveals a wedding ring inside one of the sculptures ..."

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## BOOK REVIEWS

**Sexual futures, queer gestures, and other Latina longings**, by Juana María Rodríguez, New York, New York University Press, 2014, 240 pp., US\$79.00 (cloth), US\$24.00 (paperback), ISBN: 9780814764923

Queer and Latin@ bodies, Juana María Rodríguez argues in her sumptuously written *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and other Latina Longings*, have always been read as excessive. Our bodies, she writes – in an inclusive address meant to “continually [come] together and [come] undone” which she employs throughout the book (1) – inevitably burst past the norms of proper corporeal containment through our “over-the-top” sexualized and racialized corporeal performances. It is fitting, then, that *Sexual Futures* is a book that oozes sex, affect, pleasure, and the seductive traces of bodies. This book mambos its way across many different sites and disciplinary fields, never quite staying on one identifiable path. Covering such diverse territories as kinship and its metaphors (Chapter 1), the colonial relationship between the United States and Puerto Rico (Chapter 2), the confluences between dance and sex (Chapter 3), and “politically incorrect” queer and racialized sexual fantasies (Chapter 4), *Sexual Futures* seeks to theorize the excessiveness attached to queer and racialized bodies, ultimately delivering a rigorous exploration of how racialization and the sexual intersects with the political, the social, and utopic longings for different futures, all from an explicitly queer Latina femme point of view.

The fulcrum of *Sexual Futures* is Rodríguez’s reworking of the term *gesture* as an object of study, metaphor, and analytical category for queer, feminist, and critical race theory. Politicized theories such as these have, for some time now, been interested in analyzing the relationships between socially and politically situated subjects, how they feel, and structures of oppression, or as Ann Cvetkovich puts it, “the connection between girls like me feeling bad and world historical events” (2003, 3). With the introduction of gesture as an analytical category, Rodríguez builds on this work by bringing a decidedly performance-studies commitment to the intricacies of embodiment into a similar critical frame. Analyzing gestures, for Rodríguez, is a way to think about “how bodies move in the world, and how we assign meaning [to these bodies] in ways that are always already infused with cultural modes of knowing” (2). Gestures, she argues, are deeply social actions that can be literal or figurative. *Sexual Futures* attends to both kinds of gestures: the “specific corporeal articulations of fingers, thighs, and tongues” and to how the term gesture can metaphorically register the “actions of the body politic, those activist interventions that push, jam, block, and twist social forces in the material world” (4).

Both kinds of gestures are, for Rodríguez, always laden with a dialectical force. They are reflections of our world, only legible through previously established codes of signification: gestures are “subjugated through the relations of power they also expose,” and in this way are living archives of our histories (5). However, Rodríguez also argues that gestures are inherently slippery, indeterminate, and fugitive – always reaching beyond themselves and therefore imbued with the potential to initiate other kinds of futures. Building on the utopic urgings of the late José Esteban Muñoz (2009), Rodríguez contends that “[a]s a mode of critique, gesture emphasizes how a cascade of everyday actions is capable of altering political life” (5).

It is here that Rodríguez adds to the queer theoretical canon of theorizing social relations. Rodríguez's emphasis on how gestures always reach beyond themselves positions gesture as an affirming and generative way to understand the connective forces that bind us to one another. "Even when done in private," Rodríguez contends, "gestures are always relational; they form connections between different parts of our bodies; they cite other gestures; they extend the reach of the self into the space between us; they bring into being the possibility of a 'we'" (2). This is a mode of theorizing sociality that seeks to recognize and legitimate all the queer and racialized gestures that constitute our quotidian struggles to live and grow. "Queer gestures are those that highlight the everyday labor of political, social, and sexual energies that mark our collective will to survive this day, or to at least make the effort," she writes (7). Perhaps the main drawback of such a category is just how capacious it seems to be. A conceptual limit to the term gesture never seems to emerge in Rodríguez's tome, though perhaps this theoretical excessiveness is part of her point.

But enough of all this. Let's talk about sex, baby. *Sexual Futures* participates in a growing body of feminist critical race work, exemplified by those such as Amber Jamilla Musser (2014) and Jennifer Nash (2014), that seeks to emphasize the pleasures of racialized female sexuality, as opposed to continually re-inscribing these bodies (exclusively) into a nexus of historical pain and trauma. Rodríguez's chapter, "Gesture in Mambo Time," for instance, is part theory, part memoir, written as if in a mambo club, structured by various song titles, meant to get you to imaginatively shake your ass on the dance floor and then get you into bed. Positioning dance and sex as distinct but related gestures of embrace, Rodríguez seeks to "sense the regions inside us where felt knowledge lives," casting "the ephemeral residues of gestures into language through the subjective and flawed lens of memory and longing" (99).

In this chapter, Rodríguez offers one of the most nuanced accounts of the verbal, gestural, and imagined enactments of sex and gender that can occur in queer sex that I've read — where, in the throes of the erotic, a clit can become a cock and then a clit again or subjects can embody multiple kaleidoscopic gender positions simultaneously. During sex, as Rodríguez so lyrically puts it, "each gesture becomes a roaring ocean of [performative] possibilities" (124). Through fantasy and other gestures, we can, if only for a moment, become otherwise, inhabiting and rescripting our bodies as we see and feel them. We can touch joy, take pleasure, create community, and "fuck against the walls of violence" (137). Given how so much queer theory about sex has thematized and heroized white cis gay male encounters in public spaces, Rodríguez's attention to the particularities of racialized and differently gendered sexualities is a much needed and welcome reprieve.

Unlike Musser and Nash, however, whose work on black female sexuality strategically focuses primarily on its pleasurable possibilities, Rodríguez is deeply invested in theorizing the sexual as a space that is continually negotiating both pleasure and contemporary and historical violence and trauma. Indeed, throughout her book and especially in her last chapter on Latina sexual fantasies, Rodríguez makes a strong case for the political and emotional promise of the erotic because of its profound potential to heal, negotiate, play with, and "touch" the oppression and trauma that mark marginalized lives. Trauma is a constitutive part of marginalized sexuality, Rodríguez argues. And one powerful way to confront this trauma (and its accompanying shame and abjection) is through eroticizing it. Analyzing a porn film in which a US border guard forces a Latina migrant to suck his

cock, Rodríguez asks us to consider how eroticization could be a method through which marginalized viewers think through, feel, and rework the impact of colonial and state violence on our sexual intimacies. “Through eroticization and pleasure, we are . . . presented with the possibility of reinterpreting the pain and refusal of social intelligibility that constitute our daily lives,” Rodríguez argues (136). Instead of suppressing these kinds of messy erotic attachments to scenes of racialized sexual and gender violence in the name of respectability politics or more “politically correct” sexual worlds, Rodríguez contends, we could embrace them as perverse and potent tactics of marginalized survival and transformation.

Fusing theory and memoir, and drawing lenses of performativity, affect, visibility, and the law together, *Sexual Futures* offers exciting ways to push forward intersectional explorations of sex and queer politics. Ultimately, Rodríguez’s vision of the potentials of queer and racialized sexuality exemplifies what critical theory can do when done well: provide us with a rich and compelling framework to better understand the practices many of us already engage in our everyday lives.

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**Wandering: Philosophical performances of racial and sexual freedom**, by Sarah Jane Cervenak, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014, 232 pp., US\$23.95 (paperback), ISBN: 978-0-8223-5727-8

A Carrie Mae Weems photograph, *All that Passes Before You*, graces the cover of Sarah Jane Cervenak’s *Wandering: Philosophical Performances of Racial and Sexual Freedom*. A figure in a dress gazes out onto the edge of the sea; her back faces the camera. We look over her shoulder in silence as she ponders the wayward ground of the ocean. Cervenak’s vision of wandering, or “ambulations of freedom,” begins with her back towards the audience, moving at the edges of the straightforward (150). The impossible question that guides Cervenak’s book is: how do you write into words the invisible, interior, and private philosophical agitations for black freedom? Writing within the fields of performance

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studies and black feminist theory, Cervenak builds off the work of scholars who imagine black movement beyond the surveillance of “the discursive, epistemological, and empirical” (4). Breaking with the hegemonic white logics of freedom, reason, and resistance, wandering describes a choreographic and philosophical strategy performed by black artist and “activist philosophers” – an interior kinesis not given over to sight or sound. Wandering is rumination that turns over errant ground for free black worlds in which “a resistance to understanding is the site of radicalism” (14). Duetting in turns with Sojourner Truth, Yinka Shonibare, Harriet Jacobs, Adrienne Kennedy, and Gayl Jones, *Wandering* becomes a radical black project of imagining movements of freedom beyond, and in response to, the confines of overexposed Enlightenment logics.

The book begins with a reading of Jones’s novel *Corregidora*. In Jones’s work, the character Ursa is “overcrowded” by the “noisy traffic” of familial demands and the violent “trespass” of her husband that results in a miscarriage and hysterectomy. Ursa’s life is one in which she has no space to move on her own, to think by herself. In contrast to these cacophonous scenes of familial need and narrative, Cervenak draws us into Ursa’s daydream on a bus ride that “transpires quietly in the middle” of Jones’s novel (1). Cervenak writes that Ursa’s ride is one “without narration, where the main character drifts off someplace else, just beneath the text, and off its page” (2). While the details of Ursa’s daydream are never recounted, her bus ride performs the kind of “open musing” that is, for Cervenak, characteristic of wandering (146). In the novel, Ursa’s ruminations inside a winding public-transit ride go unnoticed and remain in her own mind; moreover, the value of the interior philosophical kinesis that Ursa performs is not contingent on its availability to the novel’s reader. Wandering is thus introduced as a philosophical movement that, with a black choreographic gait, limns the edges of reason and the visible.

In order to set the stage for an analysis of black artists and philosophers, Cervenak’s first chapter returns to the performative antagonisms and contradictions at the center of Enlightenment philosophy. Reading Yinka Shonibare’s sculptural work, *Age of Enlightenment*, Cervenak gives us a starting place, from which to think the movements written into philosophy. Shonibare’s work imagines white Enlightenment philosophers including Immanuel Kant, Adam Smith, and Gabrielle Émilie Le Tonnelier as deformed wax figurines in Victorian dress. A headless and legless Kant, for instance, sits at a writing desk with a pen in one hand while the other hand palms a globe. Cervenak begins her dive into the murky Enlightenment archive by reminding us of the “relation between race, travel, mindlessness, and nonupright comportment at the heart of reason” (24). The crooked thought of Kant and Rousseau, Cervenak explains, advances reason’s insistence on a straightforward course of comportment and self-determination by enacting a form of colonial trespass. White Enlightenment philosophers advance such ruminating logics by way of a mindlessness that can only ever be temporary for them; dandyish white thought must always end in uprightness to be seen as properly philosophical. In other words, straight white men, or straight white logics, “get to move promiscuously,” while black movement is figured as morally unprincipled because of its perverse sexual and racial excess (43). Black movement has been rendered criminal by an Enlightenment logic that elevates Kant as the exemplary white drifter; the promiscuousness of straight white thought covers over the violent history and coerced movements of the slave trade. Consequently, as Cervenak argues, through time, black movement is smuggled out in the hands of black writing and performs its historically

irrevocable interiority. Black philosophical kinesisis is thus manifest in the language of Ursa's bus ride, which both gives and withholds access to her thought.

Chapter 2 looks to nineteenth-century black Enlightenment thinkers who extend anti-slavery ideals even while they roam, like Kant and Rousseau, from the ground of reason into a "different kind of philosophical movement" (81). Imagining aesthetic black futurity as noncompliance, Cervenak traces black theories of freedom through the writing of David Walker and Martin Delany, as well as black wandering by way of the phantasmatic, the cramped, and the private in the works of Harriet Jacobs and Sojourner Truth. In her invocation of Harriet Jacobs's ruminative wandering that "names those modes of travel *within captivity*," the reader recalls the "opaque terrain" of Ursa's bus ride and Sojourner Truth's phantasmatic "wandering with the invisible" (70, emphasis mine; 2; 93). Such performances are interior dances – invisible, spectral, and virtuosic movements. As Cervenak writes in reference to Truth and Jacobs: "While I don't know nor am I interested in finding out what these philosophers communicated to the invisible I cannot discount *the possibility that freedom moved* in that engagement" (94, emphasis mine). Echoing Fred Moten, Daphne Brooks, Sun Ra, and Ellen Driscoll, if "life's movement" exceeds the register of the visible, then to imagine the courses that freedom takes is to remain open to movement outside of movement.

Carrying this thought into Chapter 3, Cervenak shifts her focus to the texts of modern playwright Adrienne Kennedy. Looking at *The Funnyhouse of a Negro* (1964) and its companion, *The Owl Answers* (1965), Cervenak argues that the characters in both plays refuse coherent identity and narrative productivity. Moving against the popular and pathologizing readings of Kennedy's plays as "unfollowable" and "schizophrenic," Cervenak takes note of where daydreaming and roaming refuse compartment, transparent analysis, and the policing of thought (95, 100). She argues that Kennedy's work transgresses the enclosures of the self and the visible into a "black oceanic" that is "unlocalizable" and beyond the enlightenment-cum-psychoanalytic logic that seeks to diagnose and criminalize errant thought (109). In a revealing analogue, Cervenak writes: "Just like a city street, the mind sometimes figures as surveillable terrain, subject to trespass and constraint" (121). Kennedy's work performs a "dangerous dancing," as her plays wander beyond the trespass of the "diagnostic terrain of the disassociative" in their daydreaming tones that refuse clarity (120, 121).

Wandering around Cervenak's book, scholars engaged in contemporary discourses on black aesthetics might slow down and linger on the potential of thinking even further with the oceanic slabs of the city streets, where the concrete does not hold firm, but gives way and folds into the interiority of the black oceanic. The book begins with Weems' oceanic image and the written account of Ursa's bus ride, a street met with a seaward gaze. Particularly compelling is Cervenak's circling around Kant's invocation of the oceanic where, for Kant, "blackness was wedded to the ocean, providing the condition of possibility and the limit of reason" (54). The ocean figures here as the site of reason's discovery, a methodology of colonial island-hopping over the open waters of imagination, towards the known shores of rational thought. The ocean is an abstraction for Kant: he writes as though the ocean has not borne witness to the Africans abducted across and suspended in its waters. While abstracted blackness is generative of thought for Kant and Rousseau, and while blackness provides an oceanic space in which reason and its limits can be thought, black people are simultaneously evacuated from the realm of the thinking

subject: they are denied Enlightenment's "philosophical subjectivity and private desire" (54). Kant takes up the position of the seafarer, who wanders away from reason's straight-and-narrow, willfully oblivious to living history in the passing slave ships that flank his rational course. Cervenak's reading of the ocean here is brief, yet it seems like a potentially robust (un)grounding space for philosophies of freedom. The ocean in black studies is a deep reserve for imagining the "invisible and inaudible modes of philosophical subjectivity" (63). In a theory of black feminist philosophical kinesis – a theory that does away with the rational trespassive ground of Enlightenment thought – the ocean might provide a wide opaque space for thinking black movement that cannot be seen or known. What might be opened up if we were to link more directly the imaginative oceanic to black lived streets? Such a connection is crucial at this moment, to undo the thought that undergirds the policing of black bodies that, regardless of its attunement to Kant, is paved by way of Kant's colonial ground.

Woven throughout *Wandering* is an understanding of the stakes of a project that thinks into being black life worlds. While hashtags such as #sayhername, #blacklivesmatter, and #fergusonsyllabus have emerged as performative black life *words* since the book's publication in 2014, Cervenak's writing is underscored by a critique of the antiblack violence that takes place daily in the United States. Cervenak names the challenges of black philosophical kinesis, connecting interior philosophical agitations to the targeted policing and killing of black bodies in stop-and-frisk and "Stand Your Ground." She dedicates the third chapter to Trayvon Martin, and commends Cece McDonald's refusal of white supremacist and homophobic antiwandering disciplinary tactics. Key here is naming the ways in which the raced and gendered logics of Enlightenment play out on today's streets, targeting mobile black bodies as dangerous. Cervenak explains, "just as black transwomen, like Cece McDonald, get punished for refusing the disciplinary maneuvers of racist homophobes, authors such as [Gay] Jones must also negotiate harassment by post-Enlightenment cultural logics (even as those logics might otherwise critique the state)" (128). While it is not an exact equivalence, not *just as* McDonald's experience in which blood is spilled and her targeted black and transgender body is sent to jail for walking freely at night, the Enlightenment legacy contributes to ongoing policing of black thought.

*Wandering* closes with an image of Weems' alter ego on a beach, back fully turned to the audience. *A Broad and Expansive Sky – Ancient Rome* brings the reader back to the ocean, to the "unsurveillable paths" and ruminations that are characteristic of wandering. In this black and white image there are three horizons that stack up behind Weems's figure; the dark beach spreads into lighter water, into the almost uniformly light gray sky. The woman looks out, an observer looking out onto the ocean, which wanders into both the ground and the sky. For Cervenak, these not necessarily secular contemplations allow for a movement that cannot be seen, policed, pathologized, or criminalized. As Cervenak playfully muses throughout the book, narrative revelation and its refusal – the thoughts inside Ursa's head, Truth's and Jacobs's private conversations with god, Jones's noncompliant storytelling, and Kennedy's wandering word – *could be* spaces for freedom, but she cannot make any promises. Quietly starting again at the middle or the beginning, Cervenak offers that sometimes "a resistance to understanding is the site of radicalism" (14).

## PERFORMANCE REVIEW

### Looking with “soft eyes” at *Hex*

*Hex*, by Gibney Dance at Agnes Varis Performing Arts Center, New York, N.Y., 3 Feb. – 6 Feb. 2016.

Conceived and directed by robbinschilds. Choreography by Vanessa Anspaugh, Aretha Aoki, Anna Azrieli, Bessie McDonough-Thayer, Eleanor Smith, and Mariana Valencia. Performed by Aretha Aoki, Anna Azrieli, Bessie McDonough-Thayer, Eleanor Smith, and Mariana Valencia. Cinematography and editing by Hedia Maron. Sound by Dana Wachs/Vorhees; Costuming by Rachel Comey.

*Hex*, short for hexagon: a shape defined by six sides.

*Hex*: to put a spell on someone; or in this case, to induce a kind of shape-shifting in order to transmit a dance from one body into another.

– robbinschilds<sup>1</sup>



Pictured, L to R: Eleanor Smith and Anna Azrieli. Photo by Scott Shaw

#### I. A current between you<sup>2</sup> –

Sitting on the floor, off to the right, I watch Bessie work on her final solo while everyone waits for one more performer to arrive. I am the first “outsider” to watch a run-through. It’s

Saturday, less than a week before opening night. The performers wear their rehearsal clothes – leggings, sweats, T-shirts. Sonya, one of the choreographers, asks Bessie to imagine the room in which she originally created her material. Bessie walks onto the stage and stops downstage right, taking small steps in a circle while brushing her toes. Mariana enters and walks to the center. She thrusts her arms diagonally up into space and without a second's pause, a spotlight flares up, encircling her.



Pictured, Mariana Valencia. Photo by Scott Shaw

I observed many of these transmissions – across places, bodies, and time – during the rehearsal process. These exchanges had everything to do with *Hex*'s methodology. Conceived by Sonya Robbins and Layla Childs, a.k.a. robbinschilds, *Hex* began as a proposal, which was explained in the program as follows:

We invited dance artists Vanessa Anspaugh, Aretha Aoki, Anna Azrieli, Bessie McDonough-Thayer, Eleanor Smith and Mariana Valencia to join us in a communal generative practice. Each crafted their own short piece of movement material, which was subsequently investigated and responded to by the group. This series of solo portraits and their corresponding homages became the foundational building blocks of the work.<sup>3</sup>

For the initial stage of generating movement material, the dance artists were each given two three-hour rehearsals, one of which Sonya and Layla observed for part of the time. Sonya described robbinschilds's presence in these initial rehearsals as looking with "soft eyes:" they were not there to evaluate the material but to encounter it within the context of its

making. Regarding the nature of Sonya and Layla's presence, Anna said that although it felt a little uncomfortable to be watched, their observation had the quality of neutral witnessing: "They were kind of into everything in a way." One effect of this process was Anna's discovery that generating movement could be more arbitrary and less precious, that it didn't need to be so fraught a process. Mariana agreed, saying that Layla and Sonia's observations "helped me overcome any pressures that my own work brings into a process. I was relieved from the pressure of representing myself alone as I explored the meaning of sharing the creation of a work with others." This kind of diffused feedback structure would expand and become more complex in the next stages.

For the second part of the process, the dance artists became involved in each other's work. They each shared their material with the others, who responded via writing, talking, and movement. Anna and Mariana mentioned finding clarity in the process of showing their solos to the others – gaining insight into the ordering of specific movement sequences as well as their tendencies as dancers and as choreographers. Anna would revise as she went, adding and cutting each time she shared her material. For Mariana, the group discussion was the most productive: "I was able to express the lexicon of my movement and they were able to take that information to explore their responses with it – the results were awesome." Their reactions demonstrate the benefits of participating in a creative practice rooted in collectivity. While the collective process enabled the creation of *Hex*, it also affected the artists on an individual level, bringing a greater awareness to their respective practices.

## II. It stops and settles



Screen shot of video stills. Photo by Sonya Robbins

Dress rehearsal: the chairs are lined up around the periphery of the performance area, and the performers are behind them, stretching and hydrating. Six videos are being projected

onto the walls. I sit and watch them, completely fascinated, as two press photographers snap stills. A long time passes, and then Bessie (who does not appear in the videos<sup>4</sup>) enters the floor without any change in lighting. I see now that the area between the doors and the chairs is a sort of public “backstage” for the performers, who walk off and on throughout the show.

The videos, shot and edited by Hedia Maron, play simultaneously, and show the performers (minus Bessie, plus Vanessa) one at a time, in other studio spaces. Vibrant color – from clothes, skin, eyes, hair – stands out against white walls, wood floors, and concrete cinder-blocks. There is a long close-up of Vanessa’s face pressed against a wall. Mariana’s movements are echoed on two different screens. Aretha bends forward, wearing an orange-red dress, blinking her eyes rapidly while looking up for what feels like forever. The videos conjure images of the solitary dance artist at work in the studio, but this feels closer to a performance – faces are composed, there is no talking, napping, or texting, and the space is empty of clutter. The alongside-ness of each soloist in their respective videos feels parallel to the live performance – you take them all in at once, they dialogue in fascinating ways, and yet they remain apart.

The videos feel the most akin to other works by robbinchilds that I am familiar with. The transfer of other spaces into the performance space is one recognizable element, and then of course, there are the figures of Sonya and Layla, often sitting or standing side by side, sometimes wearing almost identical clothing. I am captivated by the subtle dynamics of spectatorship that they enact – a performative spectatorship in which they are also on display. Often they are still, watching the dance. Sometimes we see where they are looking, at other times the dancer they’re watching is out of the camera’s range. We see them seated with their backs to the camera watching Anna. Layla is shown in profile not looking at Eleanor who is dancing. We see two empty chairs. Because of the obviously constructed nature of their appearances, Layla and Sonya read as observing directors, but also as cameos of themselves – the duo often appear together in other video works too, twinning, complementing each other, making environments strange and less “natural” with their presence.

In *Hex*, the emphasis on the transfer of place yields to the transference of movement material from body to body. The videos remind the viewer that these dances were made in different spaces by individual bodies. Now these bodies are here, and their movement happens in little bursts across the stage, creating an ever-shifting landscape that lands somewhere between the Events that Merce Cunningham<sup>5</sup> started putting on in the 1960s and the current dance/performance/parties hosted by the collective AUNTS.

Because the performers are also the choreographers, I find that I take more trouble to try to identify individual styles and vocabulary. Anna is more expressive and vocal than the others (making funny faces, sighing and gasping, gazing seductively). Some of her more effortful and tense movements seem to come from martial arts, dance warm-ups, and yoga, while she also accesses fluidity and grace in more abstract sequences. Mariana’s face is often set in a resolute mask, her movements are exact and sharp – she is shooting hoops, traveling with the ball. Her shaking and swinging arms accumulate and burst forth into silent clapping. Eleanor for the most part has a neutral expression, her movements have a rubbery quality, sometimes slowed down to the point of being punishing – in one sequence she leans forward as one leg extends high behind her, her hands fluttering as they move through space. Later she slams her feet, acquiring density. Bessie has the quality of being present, not presentational, taking everything in – calm, unhurried, there

is little tension in her movements, lots of brushing and attention to details in the feet and hands. Aretha's expression displays a blankness that is ready to explode at any moment, it changes quickly, as do her movements. Right from her bold entrance, she executes countless quick turns, which are accented by her ballooning blue dress. She switches from heavy to light, from one level to another, galloping or pulling herself along the floor.



Pictured: Aretha Aoki. Photo by Scott Shaw

Once the videos stop, shortly after Bessie begins her first solo, I take pleasure in seeing the movement sequences repeated and re-situated among the performers onstage. The performers seemed to move in and out of awareness of each other, though occasionally, a very interactive situation pops up. In one such occurrence, Anna and Bessie travel in a tangle, crossing the floor on a diagonal. They continue their trajectory up and across the left wall of the space, climbing over each other. When Bessie leaves and starts a rapid sequence of turns on one leg, Anna, looking at her, hoists up one of her legs and whacks it on the wall, extending it upward until she is upside down. Meanwhile, Bessie has made herself dizzy. After she lies down, Anna climbs over her. The whole situation has an edge of competition to it, aggressive play.

### III. Does it have an end?

We are committed to our cooperative practice as a means of subverting the archetypal 'male' trope of solo-creator. For this reason we see the process of collaboration not merely as a creative strategy, but also a feminist platform from which to cull a stronger collective vision.<sup>6</sup>

In general, but especially in this work, I wonder about the continuity between the languaging of a piece, the process of creating it, and the final performance. Excited by the possibilities

inherent in a feminist platform that draws upon collective knowledge rather than relying on a single author, I wondered how this had actually played out. So I asked both robbinschilds and the performers to discuss their experience around authorship and, further, if they felt that *Hex* challenged the hierarchy between performer and creator. Mariana, who is used to making and performing in her own work, felt relieved that she didn't have to deal with logistical matters including scheduling and funding: "I was able to commit solely to my movement for *Hex* and the rich dialogues between myself and my collaborators. I didn't have to worry about the other inner workings of making a dance." Anna noted that unlike her experiences of performing in other people's work where her movement was incorporated, Sonya and Layla did not modify her movement, so that it was clearly recognizable as hers. She also expressed surprise at the explicit credit given to her and the others as choreographers in the program, explaining that, oftentimes, what appears in programs is "created in collaboration with the performers." This would seem to reflect the feminist model of collective authorship that robbinschilds set out to implement.

Sonya did acknowledge that, while the process prioritized the autonomy and collaboration of the others, "there's also the reality of robbinschilds as director, conceptualizer, driver of the project. We always recognized that we were making many executive decisions in how to organize and order and score the piece as it was shown at Gibney." She also observed that not performing in the piece inadvertently created a sense of hierarchy: "We were the two people who always had the vantage of what was happening. By not performing in the work we were outside – watching, watching, watching, without direct sensorial feedback." While the direction of robbinschilds occurs in the form of a duo (of two women), and this in itself pushes back against the "archetypal 'male' trope of solo-creator," Sonya's comments do suggest that the collaborative nature of the work did not necessarily prevent an uneven distribution of participation and authority.

But of course, robbinschilds is not working in a vacuum – funding and promotion protocols rely on distinctions between makers and performers. These protocols also affect the presentation of the performance itself. Acknowledging that the constraints and mission of the venue shaped the performance, Sonya says: "Gibney as a dance-focused environment got maybe the most 'dance-y' version of this piece. We have conceived of a multi-channel installation that also could feature performance in a very different way – less 'show' more durational solo." It may be that these institutional structures place a burden on the performance to both express its making *and* to transcend it – via the delivery of a work that falls within the realm of the prevailing aesthetic standards. These standards are regularly reproduced and reinforced by reviewers. The *New York Times* criticized the performance as lacking "a point of view" continuing: "There's nothing wrong with a collective voice. The requirement you can't skip out on is imagination."<sup>7</sup>

Rather than see the performance as the test that evaluates the effectiveness of its process, can we see it as one consequence of that process? Many choreographers make dances that function as iterations or multiple versions – but the performances are still what we evaluate. Perhaps if we look with "soft eyes," we can see something we couldn't see when our eyes were hard and steely. *Hex*'s value for me lies in the potential it brings for us to encounter not just one performance but many – pushing up against, through, and beyond the present moment. *Hex* imagines a new experience for the spectator, but the spectator has to activate their imagination in turn.

Mariana envisions a “sister version” of *Hex*: “one that happens as an open rehearsal where we wear our rehearsal clothes and invite people to watch us the way we’ve learned to watch each other.” Anna similarly imagines alternate modes of encounter, which would shrink the distance between rehearsal and performance. She even mentions how my presence alone affected the three consecutive performances I attended (a rehearsal, a dress rehearsal, and opening night), jokingly likening my first rehearsal visit to a first date – replete with first-impression anxieties. Like most encounters, the work itself needs time for its variations, textures, and idiosyncrasies to be experienced. Referring back to Robbins-Childs’ manifesto, Mariana identifies *Hex* as a project full of potentialities: “*Hex* in my experience is an experiment in potential outcome through a nurturing process of building and listening together. *Hex* at Gibney was only one kind of *Hex*.”

Seen in this light, “*Hex* at Gibney” should not be dismissed as premature or insufficient. It has its particular pleasures. Much like the videos entered as a secondary layer for me at the dress rehearsal, during opening night the appearance of the audience introduced a new element, one that was unexpectedly sensorial. There, I was intensely aware of the bodies around me. Heads turned constantly, at different times, in different directions – we were jammed in so close that we risked colliding noses. Towards the end of the show, all five performers were onstage moving in isolated proximity to ambient sound. Then they froze and Bessie began the final solo. I felt my stomach tensing at its approach and was surprised at how involved I felt after only attending two rehearsals. I watched her spin, saw how her braid hit her shoulder. The music cut out so that she finished in a silence only inhabited by her footsteps and breath. The presentational aspect of the performance seemed to disappear like a hologram as I watched her body wind down. I don’t know what the other viewing bodies around me felt – but for me, this ending signaled a beautiful pause in a continuous experiment.



Pictured: Bessie McDonough-Thayer. Photo by Scott Shaw

**Notes**

1. This text, along with “A Short Manifesto on *Hex*,” appeared in the program.
2. Section headings are overheard fragments from rehearsal.
3. From “A Short Manifesto on *Hex*.”
4. Bessie does not appear in the videos but does perform. Vanessa, one of the original dance artists to participate, does not perform but appears in the videos and her choreographed material moves through Bessie and the other performers.
5. Merce Cunningham on his 1964 Event in Vienna: “Presented without intermission, this Event consists of complete dances, excerpts of dances from the repertory, and often new sequences arranged for particular performance and place, with the possibility of several separate activities happening at the same time – to allow not so much [for] an evening of dances as the experience of dance” (Merce Cunningham Trust, 2016).
6. From “A Short Manifesto on *Hex*.”
7. Gia Kourlas, “Review: ‘Hex’ Explores Shape-Shifting and Transference,” *The New York Times*, February 4, 2016.

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