The Female Body as a Site of Knowing: Performance Art in the Spanish-Speaking World

by

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INTERMEDIARY: I listened to my heartbeat all afternoon. I finished my tasks early, so I stay here, quietly, looking out with blurry eyes, listening to my heart as it beat gently against my breasts, like a cautious lover knocking to come in, or a chick pecking at the walls of its egg, trying to move out into the light. I began to imagine my heart…(She brings her hand to her breast.)…a sea anemone…intricate, delicately colored, tucked away in its cave, an efficient, highly methodical organism devoted to the task of regulating endless distances of crepuscular canals, some wide enough for royal gondolas, others barely wide enough for rowing vegetables and food to market by the slow stroke of the oars…all of them pulsing regularly, in order. Locks open and close to the rhythm of the complicated commands of the ever-powerful flower of the heart. And then I thought…What if all the hearts in the world were to beat at once? […]I thought of the air too…It smelled of smoke and stale food…but I was like a fish, sitting in my chair submerged in the air. I could feel it against my skin. I could feel its currents brushing on me, like petals of the anemone – air that beats and circulates. And then I began to think about all I know. I know many things. I know herbs. Some heal, others taste good or smell sweet, some have a powerful effect…they reconcile…some cause death or madness, and others simply grow heavy with tiny flowers. But I know more. I store within myself part of everything I’ve seen: faces, crowds, views, the texture of rocks, corners, many corners…and gestures!...contacts! I also retain memories, memories which once belonged to my grandmother, my mother, or my friends…many which they, in turn, heard from their friends and old, old people! I know texts, pages, illusions, I know how to go places. I know roads! But knowledge is like the heart, hidden and beating, glowing imperceptibly, regulating canals that flow back and forth and flow into other canals, torrents and unexpected currents managed by radical complexity of very powerful central ventricles. All manner of news comes to me everyday: events…they all take shape. Events sound and flash; they make themselves explicit, oracular. They intertwine and germinate. Things happen, and I hear them…I receive them! I communicate them! I assimilate them! I contemplate them! NEWS!

– Emilio Carbadillo, Yo también hablo de la rosa
Introduction

The Intermediary sits underneath a spotlight, rocking in a wicker chair, dressed in a white blouse, dark skirt and shawl covering her head. Her monologue opens this work, and that of Emilio Carbadillo’s play, *Yo, también hablo de la rosa* [*I, Too, Speak of the Rose*]. Its rhythmic pulse shatters at the sound of a train derailing – iron scraping, crashing, shouting – the city soundtrack shifting to its newest disruption. The Intermediary is both the receiver and transmitter of this news. “I receive them! I communicate them! I assimilate them! I contemplate them!” Despite her distance from the derailment, from the city sounds accosting the ears of the spectators, she is the locus and means of knowledge. Her cry at the end: “NEWS!” indicates the ways in which her name reflects her function: mediator.

Preceding the rupture from her monologue is a description of the Intermediary’s heart. She listens to its beating, identifying it as something a part of yet perceivable from herself. Her focus is upon her sense of hearing, listening to her heart tap against the warm grate of her ribs, as though asking to come in. She calls it a “cautious lover,” a “chick pecking” – wrought with both desire and innocence. As she moves her hand to her heart, it becomes clear that this organ that is so distinctly hers, with its whims and wants, is part of systems much larger than itself. It is both efficient and methodical, despite the light tapping against its walls, and is in fact what regulates the intricate system of “crepuscular canals.” The rhythmic thumping of her heart dictates the opening and closing of gates, the ebb and flow of water and nourishment to “endless distances.”

The Intermediary then becomes conscious of her skin, and the feeling of the air on her body. She calls herself a fish, “sitting in [her] chair submerged in the air.” Her
heart is an extension of herself, and she recognizes her body as an extension of the universe. Air “beats and circulates” around her, as her heart beats within her, and this friction against her skin reminds her of her knowledge. Her knowledge is first absorbed through herbs, tasting and smelling, healing or killing from within the body. It is experienced within and along those borders of her body that are most intimate. The Intermediary’s heart represents tentacles outwards to the world, while the rhythm of the air reminds her of the ways knowledge infiltrates her physical being.

Within the Intermediary’s body is housed both ephemeral and permanent forms of knowledge. Her body is a prism of absorption, binding the individual with the universe. She cannibalizes all that she sees, hears, touches, tastes, so that memory is permanently housed within her physical self. She not only possesses knowledge of those “gestures and contacts,” but also of “texts, pages, illusions.” The Intermediary is thus a site of the convergence and binding of the present and history, of immediacy and distance. Her being, at the center of all, is comprised of memories of physical gestures and the worded world. “Knowledge is like the heart, hidden and beating, glowing imperceptible, regulating canals that flow back and forth and flow into other canals, torrents and unexpected currents managed by radial complexity of very powerful central ventricles.” The Intermediary knows how to navigate amongst the different types of knowledge, skillfully facilitating their circulation. Her body and her knowledge exist in a symbiotic relationship, her body controlling but also being controlled by incoming “news.” In its “radial complexity,” her consciousness is embedded in the center of environment, pulsing outwards in currents, each ray comprised of what is happening within and outside of her body, entangled in her present and past.
The question thus becomes, why *her* body? Why the *female* body? These inquiries will fuel this work. How is it that the female body of the Intermediary can come to be conceived of as both the transmitter and receptor of knowledge? In what ways does her body occupy the place of convergence between immediacy and history? The answer, perhaps, is the symbiotic relationship between the body and knowledge. The Intermediary’s body is a product of the systems of knowledge to which she refers, while the news requires her as a mode of communication. Those things that order the universe, are both outside of her and within her. She is created by and exists within taxonomic, racial, linguistic and disciplinary systems. The Intermediary’s body is read as female, and thus subjugated within the systems that order her within the universe. Her knowledge, however, gives life to these systems. Her heart’s rhythm controls their openings and closings. Performance, her performance, permits the transmission of knowledge through the body – specifically a female body. The performer’s corpus becomes a site of will and knowledge, possessing its own rhythm yet part of systems of knowledge larger than itself. The effect of this is revitalization of traditional content – the book, the museum, the worded world – through the implication of the liveness of the body.

In *Postdramatic Theatre*, Hans Thies-Lehmann writes, “The female body [is] a socially coded ‘projection screen’ for ideals, wishes, desires, and humiliations” (139). Lehmann’s work writes of the drifting apart of theatre and drama, and deems the former “postdramatic.” This simply means theatre and performance now possess the ability to destabilize the stage-audience relationship in a way that mimetic drama cannot. This destabilization results in a questioning of the audience members’ perception of what they
are seeing. The shift from traditional drama to postdramatic theatre results in a challenge to the spectator’s perception of the “other” onstage. For the purposes of this work, it will be a female “other” that will confront the spectator. Postdramatic Theatre, as well as other works, point to the newfound ability for performance artists to exploit the immediacy of their audience, using “gathered bodies” to confront a present body built into a web of discourses. Lehmann points here to the ways in which the female performing body serves as a “projection screen” for gender constructions of “real life.” The power of performance art, especially when in public spaces, is the way it highlights the real against the staged. The spontaneous spectator can either experience the pleasure of recognition in the staged or the disorientation in their differences.

Diana Taylor is a foundation to this work, and her thoughtful theories on performance tap subtly from the insides of this body of text. She opens her book The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas by pointing to the many uses of the word “performance.” She employs Richard Schechner, a performance theorist who has dedicated entire volumes to defining “performance.” Taylor and Schechner agree upon the complexity of the term, perhaps settling on the following as a loose definition: “Performances function as vital acts of transfer, transmitting social knowledge, memory, and a sense of identity through reiterated, or […] ‘twice-behaved behavior’” (Taylor 2). This notion of “twice-behaved behavior” can be described using a strip of film. Schechner explains that a director can piece and parse together a strip of film so much so that each section of film has a life of its own. The original order really loses its meaning. The origins of these restored behaviors are distorted – they may be that of myth, tradition, known, and unknown. All human action can be thought of as a
“twice-behaved behavior,” and thus as performance (Performance Studies 15). Therefore, in the same way that Lehmann calls attention to the “socially coded” performing body that affects the perception of the viewer, Schechner points to the social, cultural, historical narratives that parse together both life and performance. The incorporation of the body into these narratives instills importance to the ways in which physicality affects and transmits this knowledge.

Judith Butler’s work in Bodies That Matter, will converse with that of Schechner’s emphasizing the ways in which culturally conditioned bits of behavior result in the performance of self. Butler focuses on the performance of gender, explaining that a “performative” is a discursive practice that produces that which it names. She will specifically write of gender, using performativity to suggest that gender exists without a subject. Butler writes, “The ‘I’ neither precedes nor follows the process of this gendering, but emerges only within and as the matrix of gender relations themselves”(7). Thus, the “ideal” sex in fact adheres to the “invisible contours” of a body produced by the language of discourse. This discourse can be thought of as a frame existing without the subject. The subject steps into the rigid frame of gender upon being named male or female. The subject then performs the pre-existing script dependent upon which frame he or she enters. We adhere to our “ideal sex” narratives to maintain proximity to our social significance assumed by our biological sex. The self, thus, cannot survive in a social environment without assuming the boundaries created by the “his” or the “her” associated with one’s self. Acting apart from one’s prescribed narratives results in the subject occupying the “unlivable” sections of society, thereby becoming that which does not fit. Thus the construction of bodies that do and do not “matter.”
These culturally conditioned behaviors, of origins both known and unknown, can call attention to the different scripts we work within and against while living everyday life. My “narratives” I am conditioned to adhere to are those of woman, Wesleyan student, white, daughter, sister, friend, Californian and so on. In my actions I aim to achieve the “ideal” of all of these, according to Butler. Depending upon which narratives I occupy, and how well I occupy them, my body will or will not “matter.” Her title plays with the double meaning of the word “matter,” suggesting that the materiality of sex is a construct, processes of abjection dictating those bodies that have social significance. The discourse of sex constructs and constitutes gender identities, resulting in the making of a body without an actual body. Butler claims that before a body actually exists, discourse and language “do” gender (8). Bodies that matter do not cause discourse but instead are the effects of discourse. Discourse provides modes of primary and stable identity, thus establishing standards and frames within which the body acts.

The performing body works within these codes, narratives and scripts aforementioned. By staging the body, framing it as “performance,” it can call attention to the boundary between the real and the fantasy. Some claim performance reveals the truest parts of culture. Diana Taylor references Victor Turner, writing in the 1960s and 70s, who claims, “populations could grow to understand each other through their performances” (4). Then there are others who feel as though performance and its rehearsed, scripted nature constructs an artificial realm.

The following work will explore the role of the female performing body in revealing knowledge. Performance has the ability to destabilize historical discourse, create cultural memory, and accentuate self-awareness. In 1992, Coco Fusco and
Guillermo Gomez-Peña put themselves in a golden cage and toured around the world. They called their piece *Two Undiscovered Amerindians*. Their work deconstructed colonial discourse by rupturing the traditional roles of spectator and performer. In Bolivia and Argentina, the will and knowledge of performing women has the ability to “reappear” disappeared bodies through a manipulation of their daily selves. The Madres de la Plaza de Mayo and the Mujeres Creando will put themselves in city streets, controlling that which their society can and cannot forget – serving as both transmitters and receptors of knowledge. Finally, Spain’s Angelica Liddell will explore the physical and metaphorical borders of the real and fantasy through the use of the grotesque and the dangerous. She highlights the borders of the female body as a porous and powerful force to transform both herself and her spectators through performance.

This work will only focus on a small selection of performances, chosen for their expressions of the importance of the body in articulating and constructing knowledge. Many female performance artists in the Spanish-speaking world go unmentioned in this work, although they could have served as supporting examples. Primarily, Jesusa Rodriguez merits acknowledgment for her tremendous contributions to performance art. As one of the most famous Mexican performance artists, Rodriguez is known for consistently using her body to interrogate the power of discourse and its representation. Her work *Diálogos entre Darwin y Dios* [*Dialogues Between Darwin and God*] challenges the relationship between science and Christianity through a satirical performance in which Jesusa Rodríguez disguises her female body as a male Darwin. Other artists who deserve great mention are Ana Correa, Ana Mendieta, Carmelita Tropicana, and Liliana Felipe.
Despite their not being explicitly mentioned, their influence is flowing with and through the currents of this analysis.

The following progression will seek to prove the female performing body as a site of knowledge – as a force to subvert political, social, personal and cultural narratives by exploiting their location between the permanent and the ephemeral, historical and dramatic. Embodied performance will create an active language, one that is formed by emphasizing the liveness of the bodies of the performer and the spectator as prisms for absorption, refraction, change and reflection. The female performing body thus takes on a role of acquiring knowledge – exposing the rehearsed, produced, and creative nature of everyday life.
Chapter 1
The “Good” Discoverer: Subverting Historical Narrative Through Performance

Ladies and gentlemen, step right up and see the amazing Guatinaui. For one dollar you can have your photo taken, a priceless heirloom for your children. For fifty cents the female will perform a native dance for you. And also for fifty cents the fine-young male will tell the story of his native homeland. What a great deal!
– Coco Fusco, *A Couple in a Cage: A Guatinaui Odyssey*

Abstract

Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gomez-Peña’s work *Two Undiscovered Amerindians* re-performs the discovery of the Americas. Their work effectively challenges the accepted interpretations of colonialism by disrupting the expectations of the spectator. They make a piece about spectating, thus destabilizing and subverting conditioned historical narratives of discovery.

The Couple in a Cage

In 1992, five hundred years after Columbus arrives in the Americas, artists Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gomez-Peña use performance to move the observer into the “frame of discovery” (Taylor, *The Archive* 65). *Two Undiscovered Amerindians* in name alone makes a blaring critique of colonialism. Gomez-Peña and Fusco present themselves as caged, recently discovered indigenous peoples from an imaginary island in the Gulf of Mexico. For three days at a time, the two “Guatinaui” peoples lived in a golden cage. (“If you’d like your photo taken with the Guatinaui, you must simply step up to the cage and enunciate clearly: pho-to. They don’t speak English”) (Fusco, *The Couple in a Cage* n.p.). Fusco and Gomez-Peña dressed in “native” clothing, tattered skirts, shell necklaces, headdresses that could be mistaken for “authentic.” Gomez-Peña wears a leather mask
and black ponytail. Coco Fusco also wears her hair long and tangled and paints her face with yellows, blues, and reds. Coco Fusco describes their performance in *English is Broken Here:*

We performed our “traditional tasks,” which ranged from sewing voodoo dolls and lifting weights to watching television and working on a laptop computer. A donation box in front of the cage indicated that, for a small fee, I would dance (rap music), Guillermo would tell authentic Amerindian stories (in nonsensical language), and we would pose for Polaroids with visitors. Two “zoo guards” would be on hand to speak to visitors (since we could not understand them), take us to the bathroom on leashes, and feed us sandwiches and fruit. (65)

In Coco Fusco’s documentary of the piece, *The Couple in a Cage,* you see the reflection of the crowd in Fusco and Gomez-Peña’s sunglasses as they perform. The purpose of this chapter will be to analyze this reflection. How does *Two Undiscovered Amerindians* effectively make a performance about the act of spectating? The piece will alienate and familiarize the spectator, dissolving the safe distance between performer and spectator.

Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gomez-Peña are performance artists and collaborative partners working in the field of intercultural performance. Both Fusco and Gomez-Peña use their bodies to perform their concerns about the representation of otherness, most often with a concern with issues of gender and race-based oppression. Fusco is a Cuban-American interdisciplinary writer and performer, utilizing her body’s female, bi-racial identity as a means of implicating the audience in issues she says, “People don’t want to see.” Gomez-Peña challenges audiences with discomfort by exploring *fronteras* [borders]. He writes, “I have referred to the border as a place where
symbols crack open” (Sussler 65.). It is in the interest of both artists to explore liminal spaces. Within the space of a border or a threshold, a destabilization occurs. For Gomez-Peña and Fusco, this threshold is the space between performer and spectator. This space is filled with preconceptions, histories, prejudices, expectations – it is a mess. Their collaborative works around the quincentennial of Columbus’ arrival in the Americas will demand that spectators occupy a space in which the colonial narrative has been deconstructed. The chronology and image of the native in a cage confronts people with the conflict of how to represent the other: an issue that Gomez-Peña and Fusco give light to, dragging it out of history and into the present.

19th Century Curiosities

A deep history of capturing the “other” in cages precedes the Guatinaui’s cage. Exhibition of the other, be it an inanimate object or living being, has an expansive history, but as it pertains to colonialism can be traced to the European Enlightenment. The Enlightenment linked knowledge with material objects with the profound image of the Cabinets of Curiosity. During the Enlightenment, the wealthy packed cabinets or rooms with relics, paintings, furs, and taxonomic animals. These Cabinets of Curiosity were miniature theatres of the world for the upper class. The Enlightenment introduced an obsession with collecting knowledge, therefore the more items, the further the distance of their origin, the greater understanding the owner had of the rest of the world.

Edward Said expounds upon the relationship between the subject who knows and the object that is known. In his foundational work Orientalism, the “knower” is the European while the “known” is the Oriental. He writes in reference to the British occupation of Egypt: “Knowledge means rising above immediacy, beyond self, into the
foreign and distant. The object of such knowledge is inherently vulnerable to scrutiny […] and authority here means for ‘us’ to deny autonomy to ‘it.’ (174). The Enlightenment period had an insistence on the value of knowing things outside of your immediate life. By looking outside of one’s self, to the distant world of another, Said concludes that the foreign object is made vulnerable. The object is being looked at and is not given the opportunity to look back, or take part in forming its identity. It is robbed of its context in an effort to make the “known” closer to the “knower.” Bringing foreign objects into homes closes the literal distance between “knower” and “known.” Placing them on shelves tames the “other” by immobilizing it and making it the object of inquiry. The irrationality of the “unknown” is thus squelched by the bounds of human reason.

Sarah Bartmann is one of the most famous examples of a “collected” foreign object of 19th century Europe. A cartoon of Sarah Bartmann portrays a white man sitting with his dog, peering through his telescope at the misshapen, comic portrayal of her rear-end. Sarah Bartmann was transformed into the “Venus of Hottentot,” an emblem of the “known” objects to which Said refers. This cartoon of Bartmann was the most popular of the time, and accurately portrays the experience of an object deracinated by foreigners. The “Venus of Hottentot” is on a pedestal, without a tool to look back at the man peeping through his telescope.

Similar to performers in a freak show, her body is the spectacle, being displayed as an indication of a preoccupation with difference. It is unknown if Sarah Bartmann’s trip was one of consent. A British scientist purchased her in the Gatmoos Valley of South Africa in 1789, when she was only twenty years old. Regardless of consent, Sarah
Bartmann’s physicality made her an object of interest. Her body’s differences to that of the white European -- her blackness, voluptuous shape, full expression of female features – dictated her treatment (see Figure 1). Sarah Bartmann’s body, reduced to her buttocks and genitalia by the gaze of the European onlooker, became an emblem of difference – allowing the white European bodies to define themselves against a body they came to view as barely human.

Figure 1
Sarah Bartmann was an instrument of categorization, feeding into the obsessive nature to classify living things along the Great Chain of Being. The Neo-Platonists took the Great Chain of Being to its greatest expression, placing all that exists in the universe within a scale of perfection. God, the ideal, at the top of the Chain, then angels, stars, moon, men, animals, plants, wild animals, domesticated animals, trees, plants, stones, and so on. By being positioned between angels and animals, humans are left to negotiate between the divine and the animalistic parts of themselves. Bartmann’s blackness and feminine sexuality categorized her in proximity to the animal. While on exhibition, showmen accompanied her, taming those supposedly animalistic parts of her into a silent, naked body. The presence of the showmen could ease the crowds’ preoccupations with her mobility. As a stationary object, the fullness of her femininity – her large buttocks, breast, and genitalia – could be an object of inquiry. Visitors could pay for a ticket to watch her from a safe distance and scientists could generate data in regards to her differences. In her passivity, through her differences, Sarah became an emblem of the black, intrusive, sexualized body – a collection of disembodied sexual parts.

Sander L. Gilman writes of the relationship between the obsessions with Sarah Bartmann’s body parts to the bodies of prostitutes. Bartmann became a transient, public body, similar to that of a prostitute. By existing in public spaces, 19th century European women put their bodies at risk to sexual encounter. Sarah Bartmann was displaced from her home, and denied a domestic space in which she could maintain any sort of sexual purity. Her body instead became a freak-show of parts, losing its wholeness and its humanity based upon its blackness, femininity, and its publicity. Gilman links the obsession with Bartmann’s genitalia with the ways in which 19th century prostitutes were
defined by the changes in their genitalia over time. The prostitute’s vagina became associated with sexual illness, misshapen and infected. The more “used” the prostitute’s body, the more infected her vagina. In the same way, Sarah Bartmann’s naked public body became an emblem of unbridled sexuality – her large genitalia was her infection (Gilman 82). After her death in 1815, her genitalia, brain, and skeleton remained on display for a century and a half in the Museum of Man in Paris, truly becoming a collection of parts, just more conveniently preserved in jars. Her remains were not returned to South Africa until 2002. France refused their return to her homeland for fear of needing to return other foreign objects from the time of the Cabinets of Curiosity.

Sarah Bartmann’s life narrative is tragic and disturbing, and an example of those power relationships we imagine to be to historical and distant. The desire to put Sarah’s body parts in jars on museum shelves, is a brutal development of the Cabinets of Curiosity and in fact reminiscent of traditional ways of knowing the “other.” She is taken out of her context, isolated behind glass, and reduced to a dead object. She, therefore, cannot be the knower but only the known. The work of Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gomez-Peña seeks to challenge this very immediate reality through performance.

Diana Taylor argues for the ways performance can subvert the unquestioned representation of the other in museum spaces. Taylor claims it is the institution of the museum that is responsible for preserving subject-object relationships:

Museums enact the knower-known relationship by separating the transient visitor from the fixed object of display. Like discoverers, the visitors come and go; they see, they know, they believe – only the deracinated, adorned and ‘empty’ object stays in place. Museums preserve (a particular) history, (certain) traditions,
and (dominant) values. They stage the encounter with otherness. The monumentality of most museums emphasizes the discrepancy in power between the society that can contain all others and those represented only by remains, the shards and fragments salvaged in miniature displays. (The Archive 66)

The institutionalized, monumental space of the museum creates a stage for the “object,” the thing to be known. The museum is the evolved cabinet of wonder, serving as a supposed microcosm for understanding the world. Just as spectators paid to be witness to Sarah’s differences, the museum allows the viewer to become a “discoverer.”

Deracinated objects placed in comparison with the viewer, with the other objects in the museum, and unwillingly, in most cases, being coerced into systems of traditional knowledge. Just as Sarah Bartmann is robbed of her agency to remain a whole body, and is instead parsed into buttocks, vagina, breasts, etc., items in a museum are similarly parsed apart, in “miniature displays.” With the use of the word “discoverer,” Taylor expands the hierarchical knowledge of museum spaces into the ways in which particular histories are dominant as a result of traditional episteme. “Discoverer” permits her a transition into the narrative of Christopher Columbus, an agent of changing living bodies into “fixed objects of display.”

(Re)performing Colonial Encounters

Upon arriving in the Americas, the “discoverers” or “transient visitors” came and decidedly made the indigenous peoples “adorned and empty.” The knower-known relationship represented by a stationary object on a museum shelf was mapped onto that of the Europeans and the indigenous peoples from the moment Columbus arrived. Diana Taylor expresses the ways in which this encounter of “known” and “knower,”
discoverer and discovered, was in fact quite theatrical. Theatrical, here, meaning both exaggerated representation as well as attentive to its constructed nature. The theatrical, in Taylor’s words, “flaunts its artifice.” Columbus arrives, sees indigenous people, conquers them and their land, and then writes about it in a letter to Spain. Taylor explains:

> The colonial encounter is a theatrical scenario structured in a predictable, formulaic, hence repeatable fashion […] No matter who restages the colonial encounter from the West’s perspective – the novelist, the playwright, the discoverer, or the government official – it stars the same white male protagonist – subject and the same brown, found ‘object.’ (The Archive 63)

It is the ability to be reconstructed that is questionable in terms of legitimacy. The theatricality of the first colonial encounters result in a narrative that can be established and repeated without inspiring doubt. Those things that can be repeated and archived have a permanence that the genre of performance lacks. History’s legitimacy, according to Taylor, exists in its ability to be archived. The living, breathing subject is not historically relevant unless catalogued and preserved – made immobile by the transient discoverer.

Threaded through the chapter “Scenarios of Discovery” is Taylor’s questioning of the legitimacy of archiving. As a result of a history of representing the other in “permanent” forms of knowing, in coming to the Americas Columbus gave his experience a sense of permanence by writing letters back to Spain. Columbus is the one who controls the scene; in being the discoverer his gaze makes his subjects silent. His written word thus dictates the encounter because of the inability for gesture and
presence to be archived. He effectively disappears the “discovered” indigenous bodies through recording them, which serves as a reaffirmation of his authority as the viewing subject – the white man with the telescope. Columbus writes to Luis de Santángel:

[I] gave a thousand good and pretty things that I had to win their love, and to induce them to become Christians, and to love and serve their Highnesses and the whole Castilian nation, and help to get for us things they have in abundance, which are necessary to us. They have no religion, nor idolatry, except that they all believe power and goodness to be in heaven. They firmly believed that I, with my ships and men, came from heaven, and with this idea I have been received everywhere, since they lost fear of me. (Columbus n.p.)

In writing, Columbus effectively crafts the native body silent, shaping their needs and wants with his own motives. The silent subject thus needs to be spoken for. Columbus fills their silences with declarations of their loyalty and spiritual commitment to the Spanish crown, and implicates them in his gaze, one that sees the exchange of goods that will place their bodies as cogs in a system of devastating, lasting oppression. Columbus felt confident in his ability to interpret their gestures and performances. This supremacy of the viewer, Taylor explains, is, “the one who is free to come and go (while the native stays fixed in place and time), the one who sees, interprets, and records” (The Archive 64).

The native is immobilized and silenced to the point of absence. The observer stands apart, both civilized and privileged in their knowledge.

Performance allows us to challenge and expand discourse that so firmly positions the “knower” and the “known.” Performance is ephemeral in that it requires a living, breathing presence of both performer and spectator. It is incapable of being reproduced,
but the breathing bodies permit us something the archive does not. Hans Thies-Lehmann, in *Postdramatic Theatre*, cites performance as having the “power to question and destabilize the spectator’s construction of identity and the ‘other’” (6). When the object of interpretation looks back, when they too possess a tool for seeing, it is impossible to conceive of them as absent. Authority coerces the spectator into a position of questioning and complicating the creative, produced, and rehearsed practices of everyday life, those that have remained unquestioned in their permanence.

*Purposeful Staging*

To the shock and surprise of Gomez-Peña and Fusco, many of the spectators did not know *Two Undiscovered Amerindians* was a performance. Part of the confusion may have had to do with the careful selection of their stage. For this highly controversial piece, they selected countries deeply implicated in the exploitation of indigenous peoples. Just as letters travelled from the colonies to their “mother countries,” their golden cage travelled from Mexico to Plaza Colón in Madrid, the Australian Museum of Natural Sciences in Sydney, the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, London’s Convent Gardens, The Whitney Museum of Art, and Fundación Banco Patricios in Buenos Aires, Argentina. It is estimated that nearly 200,000 people were witness to their piece, not including the numbers of spectators in the public places, which are all heavily trafficked (*English is Broken Here* 67). The different reactions of spectators in both the public and museum space express the ways in which context influences knowledge.

The actions and reactions of spectators in museums highlight the public faith in museums as bastions of truth. Fusco and Gomez-Peña challenge the museum’s ability to (re)present by inserting uncertainty into the spectator’s experience. There is never a
moment in which they are labeled as “artists,” or the cage is called a “performance.”

Guards and docents frame the cage, giving the same monologue in each different location: money here for the photo with the Guantinaui people. The only “official” context is provided by museum staff and displayed next to the cage, in an encyclopedia-like entry:

The male and female specimens here on display are representatives of the dominant tribe from their island, having descended from the Mintomani stock. The male weighs seventy-two kilos, measures 1.77 meters, and is approximately thirty-seven years of age. He likes spicy food, burritos, and Diet Coke, and his favorite cigarette brand is Marlboro. His frequent pacing in the cage leads experts to believe that he was a political leader on his island. The female weighs sixty-three kilos, measures 1.74 meters, and appears to be in her early thirties. She is fond of sandwiches, pad thai, and herb tea. She is a versatile dancer, and also enjoys showing off her domestic talents by sewing voodoo dolls, serving cocktails, and massaging her male partner. Her facial and body decorations indicate that she has married into the upper caste of her tribe. (English is Broken Here 59).

This caption alongside the golden cage somehow reads both like a dating website profile and a plaque underneath a fossil. It is this playful, satirical reference to both scientific observation and personal tastes that emphasizes the adjusting of the Columbus narrative to that of the contemporary stage. Columbus references the Spanish monarchy and Christianity, the fifteenth century version of capitalism and globalization. These familiar objects make the cage a part of the same time, thus occupying a liminal space between
historical object and present human. The combination of details emphasizes the proximity and distance of the museum spectator. The spectator assumes authority by being outside of the cage – the comfortable viewer. However, the living, breathing nature of the object confuses the role of spectator. In the “there to be looked at” implications the audience has a level of discomfort and uncertainty.

The street spaces in which the two performed possessed even greater spontaneity and entirely different expectations than the museum (see Figure 2). The map next to the cage frames the origin of these “foreign objects.” It effectively recognizes their deracination, positioning the passerby in relationship to the Guatinaui’s distant land, just as would a street map in reference to the city. The spectator is in a space of spontaneity. The street narrative does not possess the stability of the museum narrative. The street narrative could be nearly anything; the senses are often bombarded to a point of numbness or over-stimulation. Just briefly considering the types of transactions that occur on the street: eye contact with a stranger, the impoverished asking for money, catcalls trailing women, a girl reading a newspaper, a couple lingering on a bench, a street vendor shouting. The street has a narrative, but not one of a “discoverer” and “discovered.” The hierarchy of the museum is melted and molded into something that requires interaction. The transactions mentioned involve something that occurs between two bodies. *Two Undiscovered Amerindians*, as well, highlights the space between performer and spectator. The performance on the street involves a mutual creation of meaning – coercing the public into participation – to be looked at and to look.
Familiar and Unfamiliar Consumption

*Two Undiscovered Amerindians* exhibits a “familiar” other – one that is recognizable as different through the repetition of stereotypes and quotidian objects. Examples of these touch points of familiarity are the bits of English in the language Gomez-Peña speaks, the Encyclopedia article accompanying the cage, and the Western goods they used in the cage. The importance of the modern products in the cage in relation to the exchange of goods in colonial history cannot be overstated. Arnold Bauer writes a thorough history of the exchange of goods in Latin America and the ways in which goods shape colonial history. He writes:

The Spanish insistence, for example, that towns be laid out in a strict gridiron pattern or that Indians wear trousers, the various decrees against ‘scandalous
dress,’ and the practice of forcing Andean and Mexican villagers to buy iron

goods, cloth, or mules in the eighteenth century are examples of compulsion in

order ‘to civilize,’ as well as to make money. (9)

Bauer points to the ways in which goods helped to rationalize the Americas. Material

power and culture, he claims, are expressed through food, clothing, shelter, and public

space. The Spanish used the gridiron pattern to which he refers to make the New World

recognizable to them, reminiscent of their European cities and public logic; thereby,

controlling the movement of bodies along city streets named after those of Madrid,

while imposing European dress. This imposition, however, leads to imitation. Bauer

traces through pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial times the ways in which the

imposition of the Spanish design of food, clothing, shelter, and public space evolved into

the indigenous people’s imitation. Clothes suddenly become a marker of social status,

wheat is civilized and maize becomes primitive. The indigenous people thus become

implicated in a world in which social status is defined by how “European” one is. Based

upon their native-ness, however, they will remain inferior and “othered” despite what

type of tortilla they eat and whether or not they wear shoes.

_Two Undiscovered Amerindians_ plays with the notions of control that Bauer

institutes here. They frame themselves with the words: “They are a jovial and playful

race, with a genuine affection for the debris of Western industrialized popular culture”

(English is Broken Here 59). The performance exposes this idea of imitation to which

Bauer refers. The cage symbolically imposes power upon the Guatinauis. Imitation is in

the language and gestures of the Guatinauis. The language Gomez-Peña speaks has

“debris” of the English language amongst its gibberish. He speaks a language that
sounds like a hodge-podge of nonsense and peppers it with “Coca-Cola,” “San Antonio,” “Chicago.” The purpose of his speech is to tell the story of the Guatinaui people. However, no one can understand a thing except for the English words. Just as Columbus silenced the indigenous peoples of the Americas with language, this fake Guatinaui language effectively draws attention to their silence. The spectator can say, I recognize that you are speaking, but you cannot speak like me. The Guatinaui’s actions would answer Foucault’s question with the price of imitation. Fusco and Gomez-Peña provide the spectators the rationality they need to make sense of the undiscovered peoples. To tell the truth about themselves, they use language littered with imitations. However, despite these attempts at telling their truths, they are not understood. The truth they emit is instead symbolic, exposing the proximity of the Guatinaui, making them a part of the same time and place.

The Guantinaui have a “general affection” for Western culture, as is expressed through their possession and knowledge of how to use all of those things they have in their cage. These items have the potential to threaten the spectator. The spectator asks, “How do they know how to use a laptop? Why is she wearing Converse sneakers?” It pulls the spectator into the reality of their shared time and space that they might not want to see, but also helps the spectator relate to the Guatinaui. It becomes about what the spectator recognizes. The television, sunglasses, books, gas mask, and so on are placed in the cage with intent just as the English words. Bauer claims that the reason the colonizers insist upon imposing their goods upon colonized is to make sense of mystery. He writes, “Human rationality presses us to make sense of the world” (9). What else could lead to the Cabinets of Wonder and the dissection and pickling of Sarah
Bartmann’s genitalia? There is a desire here to conquer difference – to claim ownership of the space between subject and object through material goods. The Guatinaui’s performance explodes this notion, sets it on its head. The goods have the potential to threaten the space between spectator and performer, but are also necessary to make the spectator familiar. The viewer is meant to look and say, “I like Diet Coke, I smoke Marlboros.” Thankfully for the spectator, Fusco and Gomez-Peña cage themselves. Spectators can reassure themselves of their distance, and only if they get too close can they see themselves reflected in the Guatinaui’s sunglasses.

*The Cage*

The cage creates a historical scenario of representation and presentation that has not disappeared. The cage re-frames the history of the subjugation and exploitation of native peoples’ bodies. They are made with the intent to protect the viewer from whatever is inside of the cage. This particular golden cage has two perhaps contradictory purposes. Diana Taylor will agree, that the cage traps spectators in the is/as of performance as laid out by Richard Schechner in his foundational work, *Introduction to Performance Studies*. To say a dance, gesture, protest is performance is to make an ontological affirmation. Something is performance in a local sense, but may not be considered performance elsewhere. Performance is also a methodological lens through which events can be analyzed as performance. This permits performance to serve as an epistemology, something through which knowledge can be harvested. The cage is performance, and will be analyzed as performance. “The is/as underlines the understanding of performance as simultaneously ‘real’ and ‘constructed,’ as practices that
bring together what have historically been kept separate as discrete, supposedly free-standing, ontological and epistemological discourses”(9).

The cage is a performance. It exists as a response to the quincentennial of Columbus “discovering” the Americas. The cage takes part in the ephemeral nature of the performance. It exists as performance in its ability to evoke a long history of the physical restriction on the indigenous body. The Guatinauis are restrained, protecting the spectators from their savage-ness. By performing from inside a cage, the Guatinauis’ sexual appetites can be contained. The cage holds the Guatinauis in place, maintaining identifiable boundaries. The cage creates an “us” and “them,” a “now” and “then,” dichotomy which protects viewers from the discomfort of liminal spaces. As Taylor writes, there is no “inter-, no cross-, no transcultural nada”(The Archive 72). The cage allows for the spectator to fantasize about a world in which difference is contained and separated.

Despite the visual rigidity of “us” and “them” categories, the cage creates multiple frames with which the roles of the performer and spectator become mingled. Thus far the cage has been referred to as framing the performers. However, there are in fact multiple performances taking place inside and outside of the cage. The spectator of course looks on, as the Guatinauis exist within the cage. Through the bars, the spectator can act as the “discoverer,” witnessing the silent “objects” from all sides. While the Guatinauis pace they are looking back through their dark sunglasses. The inability to see where they are looking gives the spectator the illusion of not being gazed upon in the act of gazing. Taylor will claim that the spectator is in fact the “main player” of the performance (The Archive 69).The Guatinauis also have an all-seeing view of the
spectators, and while the spectators look on, their responses are filmed. A camera moves among audience members, capturing their responses. Archiving the audience’s replies instead of the Guatinaui’s performance employs the audience members as both actors and spectators, as are the Guatinauis. The cage is necessary as a frame to create and maintain multiple simultaneous spectacles.

The Couple in a Cage, the video archive of audience response, exposes the rampant myopia of the contemporary world. Most of the recorded responses were of spectators who did not realize it was a performance. One man says, “I study a lot about the Indians. I do a lot of studying of the Indians out West. This is one tribe I didn’t know of” (English is Broken Here 42). Another, more skeptical female viewer says, “To call them specimens? I mean, they’re human beings” (43). There was a general discrepancy as to whether the piece was art or artifact. Fusco writes, “Even those who saw our performance as art rather than artifact appeared to take great pleasure in engaging in the fiction, by paying money to see us enact completely nonsensical or humiliating acts” (79). In the encounters with the unexpected, they are caught off guard. The spontaneity of this moment allows their “real” beliefs to rise to the surface, giving the viewers the opportunity to decide between reality or fantasy.

The moment in which the spectators reach through the bars or interact with the Guatinaui alludes to the mixing of real or the fantastic. The cage is performance in that it separates the Guatinaui from the spectators. The moments of physical interaction, when the audience pays to feed the Guatinauis, or touches them, or asks them to pose for a picture – these moments of audience participation, in Schechner’s words, “[expand] the field of what a performance is, because audience participation takes place precisely at the
point where the performance breaks down and becomes a social event” (*Environmental Theater* 22). The spectators touch and feed and play with the Guatinaui, toying with the illusion of separation, occupying the threshold between performer and spectator. What then, could be the social truths that arise from these moments in which the performance becomes a social event? Both performer and spectator, and whatever versions of that are at play, become vulnerable. Fusco writes in *English is Broken Here*: “Those are moments when I’m glad there are real bars. Those are also the moments when, even thought I know I can get out of the cage, I can never quite escape” (59).

In a recent interview with *BOMB Magazine*, Guillermo Gomez-Peña addresses the discrepancy of his and Fusco’s experiences of living in cage for three days at a time. He attributes their different responses to being “looked at” to their genders. Females, he argues, are more conditioned to constant exposure to the public eye.

Coco, as a woman, has had to face this sinister experience of always being objectified. Because of that, she has already developed mechanisms of protection against that gaze, which make her seem very tough. She can turn off an inner channel and disconnect from that experience, just as she would riding the subway. (Sussler 67)

Performance is a female dominated field, the exposition of the female body something that is more familiar and accessible to women whose bodies are often subjected to a daily objectification. The masculinized spectators’ gaze cages the female just as literally as the golden cage immobilizes the Guatinaui. What is key to Gomez-Peña’s reflection is the experience of the performer as something that contributes to the social and political
implications of their work. The male Guatinaui will toy with his feminization by addressing the ways in which his male body is occupying a typically feminine position.

(Un)feminized, (Un)sexualized Bodies

The feminization and sexualization of the indigenous body is rampant in the performance, and most often inflicted upon Fusco. Fusco and Gomez-Peña rarely interacted with each other in the cage. The fantasy, therefore, had nothing to do with imaging their intimacy, because the viewer was given no opportunity to make that connection. Spectators could instead have their fantasies on the surface of each individual body. In Taylor’s words, the Guatinauis “out-fetishized the fetish” (The Archive 64). Fusco was captivating in her grass skirt, voluptuous chest, skimpy bra top, and grass skirt. Audience members could pay her to dance and rap – evoking eroticism that audience members grasped much more strongly than the colonialism critiques. Fusco writes extensively of her experiences with sexual advances in the piece in English is Broken Here:

A middle-aged man who attended the Whitney Biennial opening with his elegantly dressed wife insisted on feeding me a banana. The zoo guard told him he would have to pay $10 to do so, which he quickly paid, insisting that he be photographed in the act. After the initial surprise of encountering caged beings, audiences invariably revealed their familiarity with the scenario to which we alluded. (50)

As mentioned before, the piece plays with touch points of familiarity, then isolates the viewer. Here the man sees a familiar masculine fantasy: a caged, silent woman. The caged
woman evokes certain animalism, the simultaneously feared and desired, unbridled female sexuality. He can approach this fantasy by paying for it, keeping his distance through the exchange of money, and watching his wife perform the actual act. Fusco emphasizes the familiarity of these scenes to the spectators, and the ways in which her body, real or fantastical, is coded in a way that makes this treatment comfortable for audience members. However, as Fusco and Gomez-Peña continually do in this piece, they transform the familiarity of sexualizing and feminizing the colonized body into one of deep discomfort and confusion.

Gomez-Peña is sexualized and feminized in a way that identifies colonial discourse. He is macho in some ways, in his posture and his spiked gloves and dog collar. His hair is long and coarse, evoking Columbus’ description of the indigenous men: “coarse hair like the hair of a horse’s tail” (The Archive 64). He is feminized in his caged-ness—the fears of the colored males’ sexuality restricted by golden bars. He is perhaps subjected to even more physical contact from audience members than Fusco. One woman asks for plastic gloves so she can touch him, moving up his leg and approaching his genitalia before Gomez-Peña steps away. There is a moment in Two Undiscovered Amerindians where a spectator pays five dollars to view the genitals of the male Guatinaui. Gomez-Peña tucks his genitals between his legs, revealing only a female triangle. The spectators expect to see his penis, but instead Gomez-Peña shows them a “male vagina.” It’s as though they are saying, “Our bodies are what you have historically constructed them to be.” The audience perceives Gomez-Peña as a feminine object, and thus he transforms their fantasy into a visual reality. It is this feminization that makes his presence relevant in a work about female performers. The vulnerability of the
performer’s body in many ways points to the vulnerability of the female body in a male-dominated world. The subject of the gaze is most often a female subject, the gaze most often male. Gomez-Peña reflects this back on the spectator.

*The “Good” Spectator*

While performing in Buenos Aires, the vulnerability of being a “living diorama” was exposed in an act of random violence. The performance is not just fiction but life. Gomez-Peña writes of the risk inherent in existing along the fluctuating borders between art and life in his essay, “The Artist as Criminal.” He writes of his own attack during *Two Undiscovered Amerindians*:

Suddenly, from within the crowd, a mysterious character appeared, sprinkled me with liquid, then disappeared. Seconds later, I realized I had been the victim of a physical assault. My stomach and legs had been burned with acid. (Gomez-Peña 115)

He passes the attack off as a misunderstanding. The confusion being that the performance was a direct commentary on the Argentine military. Gomez-Peña claims that it is quite different to take performance into the street, public space. Gomez-Peña makes clear that the performance artists is aware of these risks, however it is sometimes unexpected when and where these moments of pure physical vulnerability will occur.

“At such times, the devil appears before us” (112).

Placing their performing bodies in a position in which it may be read or misread is truly an act of compassion. Taylor writes beautifully of the function of the indigenous body, as pertains to the bodies of Fusco and Gomez-Peña:
The drama of discovery and display of native bodies – then and now – serves various functions. The indigenous bodies perform a ‘truth’ factor; they ‘prove’ the material facticity of an Other and authenticate the discoverer/missionary/anthropologist’s perspective, in terms of both geographic and ideological positioning. That materiality, of course, confirms no one point. As in the case of the native populations of the Americas and the recently ‘discovered’ tribe in Brazil, the native body serves, not as proof of alterity, but merely as space on which the battles for truth, value, and power are fought by competing dominant groups. (The Archive 71)

As material, “othered” bodies, on display and visible from all angles, Fusco and Gomez-Peña’s bodies serve as the sites of disputed knowledge. The competing powers of colonial discourse, gender discourse, racial stereotypes, social norms, and so on and so forth take place on their bodies. The realistic-fantastical scenario the Guatinauis create highlights these very real, present discourses. The entire performance makes vulnerability of both spectator and performer into a power relationship, but how would either “win”? This piece brings to question, what would a “good” audience member be? The importance and validity of this question is crystallized in Fusco’s documentary. She archives the responses of audience members, preserving the closeted colonist and the ones who fell for it. As a viewer of the documentary, there is a sort of sick satisfaction in feeling as though you are smarter than the viewers of the piece. There is a feeling of, well of course it is performance, how could you fall for it? Their responses are live and ephemeral, but preserved on film. While there has been discussion of the risk of the performing bodies, the spectating body is put at risk as well. There is no space of safety
or comfort for the spectator. The piece draws them in to reveal an unrehearsed response. This response is captured, caged forever, just as Fusco refers to her permanent existence in a cage. The female performer cages that which has caged her.

In the act of caging both performer and spectator, to differing degrees, the piece exposes the space between performer and spectator. Taylor writes, “How does one come to inhabit and envision one’s body as coextensive with one’s environment and one’s past, emphasizing the porous nature of skin rather than its boundedness?” *(The Archive)* 10. It is through the creation of a living space between spectator and performer that Fusco and Peña serve as a reflection of the ways the spectator is trapped in particular historical narratives and discourses. Their performance has the ability to exploit the porous nature of the human body, contaminating it with discomfort and alienation, and squeezing out the narratives that comprise it. They challenge traditional content with their bodies that colonial discourse acknowledges as a part of a distant past. What is left to sift through is the space between the performer and the spectator, the disorientation that comes with broken expectation. In being forced to break out of accepted narratives of the knower-known relationship, the spectator must participate in embodied knowledge only communicable by the living liminal space made possible by performance. What is left is the spectator, gaping at his or her own reflection in the Guatinaui’s sunglasses. *Let me draw her closer to make sure she is different from me.*
Chapter 2
Reappearing the Disappeared Through Transgression

A ‘soul inhabits him and brings him to existence, which is itself a factor in the mastery that power exercises over the body [...] The soul is the prison of the body.
– Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*

Abstract
The Madres de la Plaza de Mayo perform their motherhood weekly to respond to lives lost in Argentina’s “Dirty War.” The Mujeres Creando will deconstruct the Madres’ performance of ideal motherhood in “Acción 1.” The two groups effectively “reappear” lost bodies through very different manipulations of the performance of their daily selves. The use of both body and language permits the female performers to transition from biological mother to political motherhood, thereby imagining a new society through performance.

Punishment, A Spectacle

1780, the Spanish colonial forces in Bolivia made a public spectacle of Bartolina Sisa’s body (T. Daly 11). Her body was to be beaten, flogged, raped, whipped, and dragged through the Plaza Murillo, then hung in the gallows. Bartolina’s mutilated body was then quartered, limbs and head severed. Each arm and leg, alongside her decapitated head would travel from *allyn* to *allyn* as warnings of the consequences of disobedience to the Spanish crown. The *allyn* is the Quechua and Aymara word for the political unit upon which Andean societal structure is based. Bartolina and her husband defended the Aymara and other indigenous groups against Spanish colonial forces. She believed in the right of the *allyn* to exist. She and her husband led an uprising of 40,000 people in La
Paz to defend their rights to possess shared heritage and land rights through the centuries old *allyus*. Her disobedience is transformed into docility during the spectacle of her torture. Her body is publicly made physically powerless. Bartolina’s womanhood makes her body vulnerable to penetration and she is publicly made into a hole, her private body invaded. Naked and skinless, she is publicly made into an object.

Bartolina Sisa’s public torture serves as a distressing visual to the consequences of being a disobedient female body. The exact way in which she was killed reflects the ways in which the female body is subject to control by societal forces. She was made docile through spectacle. Her sexuality was made an object of control and her corpus an instrument of instilling fear. The forcible docility of the female body is no longer emphasized in the same public way as it was with Bartolina’s body. However, through their physicality the Mujeres Creando and the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo reiterate the ways in which the female body is still very much used as an instrument to enact power.

One of the standards of the “obedient body” is that of performing the “ideal” sex. Bartolina’s punishment, the spectacle of her disobedient body, was enacted in ways specific to her female body. Her punishment, and the markers of disobedience, point to the existence of an ideal sex. Judith Butler revolutionized the conception of gender and sexuality in her works *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies That Matter*, in which she insists that the “ideal” of each sex produces the body it controls. We conform to the constructed sex that would never be involved in the transgressions of Bartolina Sisa.

Female bodies adhere to a multiplicity of scripts that are embedded within Butler’s notion of “ideal” femininity, all constructed by their possession of a womb. The frame of motherhood is that which is produced by a discourse of what makes a female
body “matter.” Judith Butler in *Bodies That Matter* writes of the phallogocentric world, a history that has privileged the phallus in the construction of meaning. The very language that produces frames of gender is that which places the phallus at the center of the world. The phallus is therefore the symbol of origin, making the female body, the vagina, defined in opposition to the phallus. The word “woman” is etymologically strung to the word “matter,” and “man” to “form.” The word “matter” stems from the word “womb,” thus associating woman forever with the possession of reproductive capabilities. It is this very discourse which will make the frame of womanhood, the scripted subject, that of domesticity and motherhood. Female, without need for much explanation, is consistently tied with the home, with reproduction, with caring for the child. Motherhood and domesticity is one of the many “scripts” of the female gender. This script is inscribed upon and through the female body as an articulation of the “norm,” of the “standard.” Judith Butler claims that despite the ways in which the body is coded and acted upon by discursive powers, it still possesses a certain agency. This agency is that of subverting the law against itself to radical and political ends. Butler insists construction and deconstruction of the frame of gender performativity will instill bodies with agency. The Mujeres Creando and the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo call attention to the ways the powers of discourse are enacted upon their female bodies, and claim the agency to which Butler refers.

The purpose of this chapter will be to analyze the ways in which Mujeres Creando and Madres de la Plaza de Mayo use public spectacle to expose the oppression they experience under patriarchal systems. Working with a multiplicity of scripts, the Mujeres and the Madres perform their motherhood, working within their gender identity
to reveal the structure of their daily selves as well as a contingency for imagining motherhood as a political identity. Both of their performances utilize embodiment and language to construct a public motherhood, making their female bodies representative of lives lost to political oppression. Artaud in *The Theater and its Double* coins the term “active language” as something that transcend the customary limits of feelings and words through the play between space, stage, and symbols. While not exactly the stage performers to whom Artaud refers, both the Mujeres and the Madres make use of the public sphere, through body and through language, to subvert the laws working against their bodies to political ends. In doing so they reinstate their bodies as sites of creativity, rejecting the making of female bodies into docile spectacles, as in the case of Bartolina. The Madres de la Plaza de Mayo in their weekly walk and Mujeres Creando in “Acción 1” will recreate disappeared bodies, thus reconstructing the limiting scripts of motherhood.

*Madres de la Plaza de Mayo*

The Madres de la Plaza de Mayo are actual mothers, crying out for their disappeared children every Thursday at 3:30 in the afternoon. Their performance started with a question: *Where are our children?* When their inquiries were met with silence, their questions grew into a decades long chant: *Where are our children? We want them back alive! Why did their torturers and murderers get away with murder? When will justice be done?* Their march began on April 30, 1977, a year after the start of what would come to be known as Argentina’s “Dirty War.” Hebe de Bonafini, the president and co-founder of the Mother of the Plaza de Mayo, says of the first day in the Plaza: “It was a woman I knew, whose
son was in prison, who told me...that some mothers of political detainees were going to the Plaza de Mayo...to ask the authorities for information on the whereabouts of their children” (Hernandez n.p.). After visiting churches, police stations, and government offices the women decided to gather in the Plaza de Mayo, a historical site for public protest. Almost immediately upon their arrival the group of fourteen it was demanded they disband. Gatherings of more than three were forbidden. Nothing, however, was said about walking in pairs. Bonafini says, “By absolute chance, in response we started grabbing each other in pairs, arm to arm, and started walking in circles around the square. There was nothing illegal about that” (Hernandez n.p.). The small gathering of mostly illiterate mothers from small towns outside of the city has been marching in the same circle for thirty-seven years now. Their numbers and diligence have crafted their presence into an international symbol of collective consciousness of Argentina’s desaparecidos, but their questions still remain unanswered.

Argentina’s “Dirty War” lasted from 1976 till 1983, and refers to a period of state terrorism under General Jorge Rafael Videla. In March 1976 the Argentinian government enacted a well-predicted coup, determined to provide a lasting bureaucratic-authoritarian regime to a state of political turmoil. In a search for longevity and stability, the military turned inward, arresting “subversives” at will. The military government utilized state terrorism to establish a conservative national identity and patriarchal ideology. Their ideologies stemmed from an unwavering commitment to national interest. In “El acta de objetivos y principios del Proceso de Reorganización Nacional”, it is written, “Fulfillment of political sovereignty based on the actions of revitalized constitutional institutions that permanently locate the national interest above any sectarianism, trend or
personalism.” Soon after followed by, “Validity of the values of Christian morality, national tradition and the dignity of the Argentine” (“El Acta De Objetivos Y Principios Del Proceso De Reorganización Nacional”). To achieve a unified state founded upon national sovereignty, Christian morality, tradition, and so on, they stole bodies off the street. They “disappeared” their people. They made desaparecidos a known but silent part of a national consciousness – a carefully crafted spectacle. Most desaparecidos were in their early 20s, a third were women, 21% students, and 30% members of the working class.

The estimated victims of this violence are estimated to be anywhere between 15,000 and 30,000, the desaparecidos are estimated to be between 10,000 and 20,000 (Skidmore, Smith and Green 187). This monumental uncertainty fuels the lasting questions of Mothers wrapped in white and carrying scars of absence

The Mothers’ pleas grew rapidly in force and in number. By July of 1977 there were 150 Madres marching every Thursday. That same summer, a naval lieutenant by the name of “Gustavo Niño” infiltrated the Madres. The mothers remember Gustavo as an active participant in planning meetings. On December 8, 1977, eight Madres were kidnapped outside Santa Cruz Church in Buenos Aires following an organizing meeting. Three of the “disappeared” women were founders of the group: Esther Ballestrino de Careaga, Maria Eugenia Ponce de Bianco, and Azucena Villaflor. The Madres that had made the disappeared present with their cries, were now among the disappeared themselves. Two weeks after the kidnapping, five dead female bodies washed ashore the Rio de la Plata. It was thought that the bodies were thrown out of a plane over the Atlantic Ocean, and washed up onto the shores of the river running along the border of Argentina and Uruguay. Until 2005, the five bodies were buried in tombs marked as
unknown (Trigona n.p.). The remains were then identified as the disappeared Madres by a non-profit dedicated to the forensics of naming the unnamed remains. They have since been cremated and buried in the Plaza, under the feet of the protest they began decades before. Despite the violent repercussions, the Madres continued with courage and in October 1977 developed a petition with over 24,000 signatures demanding the truth about the nation’s disappeared. Their numbers only grew, and their actions expanded beyond the plaza. In 1981 the Madres organized the March of Resistance with over 200,000 participants. In 1983 they plastered the silhouettes of the disappeared all over Buenos Aires, images including the dates and names of all the mothers’ missing children. Despite the movement’s expansion outside of the plaza, the significance of the site of their performance cannot be overemphasized.

The Plaza de Mayo has been a hub of Argentine political life since its construction in 1884. Its name signifies the May Revolution of 1810 in which Argentina started its fight for independence from Spanish imperialism. A year after the May Revolution, the Pirámide de Mayo was built in the center of the Plaza to honor the first anniversary of the Revolution, crowned with an allegory of Liberty (Skidmore 187). The Madres march in a circle, on top of, and around symbols of freedom and independence, wearing their children’s faces like a second skin. They march in front of the Casa Rosada, the presidential palace, pausing only occasionally at their portable microphone to demand the truth. The wear white handkerchiefs inscribed with the date and name of their missing child, uniting them like a flock of doves. Their slogan, “Apración con vida,” or, “Bring them back alive,” unites them in language, and is painted on their signs and the ground they circle. Their poems and words are composed in booklets and passed
through the Plaza. Some take their booklets and express solidarity, others cross the street
to avoid them. In this never ending circle the Madres have taken what was an
unprotected, vulnerable space and have made it the breathe of their movement. Pictures
of women in white handkerchiefs now paint the sidewalks of the plaza, representing
those who have passed or disappeared ("Asociación Madres De La Plaza De Mayo").
Most Madres have asked their remains to be interred around the Píramide. In
performing mother this way, their questions defy both time and physicality, in reality and
in metaphor.

As the Madres’ movement gained continual momentum, the junta cordoned the
Madres off from the plaza. In 1979 the Madres raided the Plaza de Mayo, pressing into
lines of military forces to reenter the space they had claimed as their own. In
*Environmental Theatre*, Richard Schechner writes: “I believe there is an actual, living
relationship between the spaces of the body and the spaces the body moves through;
that human living tissue does not abruptly stop at the skin” (2). In this fashion, the Plaza
de Mayo serves as a space in which the Madres can perform the role of political mother,
making a public space into a type of home. Their occupation of the space is marked by
their physical bodies, as well as the silhouettes of their white scarves painted on the
ground. The echoes of their cries take shape in the silhouettes of each individual
desaparecido, painted to the walls in and around the Plaza de Mayo. The Madres through
their performance give a presence to the absent, materializing lost bodies through
spectacle.
The Mujeres Creando entered the public with a cry as well, a cry filled with desire to bring an end to patriarchal structure. In 1990 the Mujeres Creando united in La Paz, Bolivia as a feminist-anarchist movement ("Mujeres Creando" n.p.). Their goal is to use creativity as a mode of resistance and social participation to recover public space controlled by patriarchal forces. Their movement is one of graffiti, public debates, radio, television, their newspaper Mujer Pública, but is most predominately marked by their street presence. The Mujeres Creando are well known for their acciones, public performances that emphasize the exposure of the “abnormal” in spaces of “normality.” Their spectacles often disrupt the rhythms of public life, stopping traffic and passersby. Acciones address a span of issues in Bolivian society: sexuality, family, religion, motherhood, and economic. In 1990 three friends – Julieta Paredes, Maria Galindo, and Monica Mendoza – decided to respond to oppression resulting from racism, dictatorship, and debt from a feminist-anarchist perspective. In an interview with The
New Internationalist in 2002 they said, “Everything was organized from the top down, the women only served the tea or their role was a sexual one, or they were nothing more than secretaries” (Ainger n.p.). There was little talk of a militant, radical feminism – a feminism of the streets.

A feminism of the streets is that of radical creativity and diversity occurring in public space. They insist upon addressing all issues of oppression, not just “women issues,” and with women of all classes, races, sexualities, and so on. Julieta Paredes in an interview with The Anarchist Library, expands upon their belief in diversity:

From the viewpoint of Mujeres Creando, one way to move toward our goal is the concept of diversity (the other is creativity). Diversity is fundamental for us, because if you look at how other groups are made up, they’re usually of the same kind of people (barrio [neighborhood], young people, workers, lesbians, etc.). Diversity is a way to criticize these “enclosed cubicles” in society. Mujeres Creando is made up of lesbians and heterosexuals, whites and indigenous women, young and old women, divorced and married women, women from the country and from the city, etc. The system tries to keep us in the “enclosed cubicles” and to divide us so that it can control us more effectively. (Ainger n.p.)

Paredes’ words reflect those theories of Foucault, regarding the ways in which the body and soul are controlled by the placement of bodies within a system of standards. Paredes’ use of the cubicle image marks the ways the restriction of human bodies to small physical spaces as punishment has translated into humans being socially defined by small, square categories to remain legitimate. The diversity of the group’s members dissolves the notion of the “ideal” female, and of issues of oppression being specific to
one woman and not another. By insisting upon the inclusion of all types of female bodies and approaching all issues, the Mujeres claim their goals as truly feminist-anarchist. Anarchism, defined here as “a political philosophy which views the state as an unnecessary and harmful institution and argues that society should be organized without a centralized government, laws, police, or other authority” (Skidmore 187). Their definition of feminism is as follows:

As feminists in Mujeres Creando we want revolution, a real change of the system; we do not want just to change capitalism, nor just to change attitudes toward women, but also a change in attitude toward young people and the environment. We want to change patriarchy, in a historical and long-lasting transformation that is being created by the feminism we dream of. (Paredes n.p.)

The Mujeres Creando disregard law as a boundary to their actions, often placing their bodies in situations of great risk to reclaim public space and to “change patriarchy.” Their cluttered, loud website opens by claiming, “The streets are where we take on our full meaning” (“Mujeres Creando” n.p.). The Mujeres view their street presence as necessary for provocation. It is in their interactions with spectators and authorities that they insist upon their roles as street activists, not artists. They certainly have all of those associations one generally has with activism. For example, as a part of their most recent work 13 Horas de Rebelión, the Mujeres reacted to the “Miss Mundo Boliviano” beauty pageant, staging themselves outside, many of then naked, and pressed up against authorities. Other pieces have involved two women performing lesbian sex in public plazas (“Mujeres Creando” n.p.). There are dozens of videos of the Mujeres Creando being challenged by authorities, grabbed and pushed. Both their embodiment and use of
language consists of great risk, calling back to the ways in which Bartolina Sisa was one woman standing for many, her human fragility used as a tool to instill fear in the disobedient body.

When their bodies are not in public spaces or performing, their graffiti gives their provocation a sense of permanence. Their interview in *The New Internationalist* expands upon their street art:

*We paint graffiti – *las pintadas* – this is one of the communicative forms that really gets through to people. It began as a criticism of what the Left is – and the Right. It was our response to their painting in the streets saying ‘vote for so-and-so.’ They were affirmative or negative phrases, ‘not to the vote,’ ‘yes to this,’ ‘no to that’. What we do instead is we appeal to poetry and creativity to suggest ideas, which aren’t just ‘yes’ or ‘no’, ‘Left’ or ‘Right.’ (Paredes n.p.)

The Mujeres Creando’s graffiti, as mentioned above, establishes a sort of permanent occupation of the patriarchal “cubicles” of space they seek to destroy. They often inscribe the walls with fragments of poetry, text that inspire contemplation or interpretation. They write in the same cursive, making their presence consistently recognizable. The Mujeres fervently resist being called “artists” perhaps for the reasons above. As creators, activists, feminist-anarchists, the Mujeres’ work can evade being perceived as making a statement belonging to an individual. They are a collective, inclusive, absorbent movement, as fluid as the street life they insist upon occupying.

The *acción callejera* focused on for the duration of this chapter will be “Acción 1,” which is staged in the Plaza Murillo in La Paz, Bolivia. Traffic surrounds the square, and in footage produced by the Mujeres, there are shots of cars stopping, passerby beginning
to crowd around a female body dressed in white, lying face down on the plaza ground. There are buckets filled with a blood colored liquid scattered around her, and a man in drag walks the inside of the circle of spectators beginning to form, dressed in a suit and pearls, peering with curiosity at the immobile body. Mujeres member Norma Merlo stands, wearing a microphone around her head, beginning a monologue. She shouts out, calling the president an assassin and claiming that this performance is in honor of the lives lost in the struggle for political power. She then begins to cover her arms with the blood colored liquid, then dumping the buckets over the plaza, drenching the ground in red. As the crowd gathers, authorities press in towards Norma. She then kneels, a small girl wearing a backpack filled with small wooden crosses jumps on her back. Norma walks through the authorities, shouting “Nombre perdido,” “No hay democracia sin tortura,” “Presidente Dictador.” [“Lost name”; “There is no democracy without torture”; “President Dictator.”] She and the little girl hand out crosses to spectators; every cross inscribed with a different name of a victim of political strife. The Mujeres’ camera pans to the man dressed in drag, who begins to argue with Norma, praising the democracy. The music accompanying the video clip escalates in intensity, as the police surround Norma and the little girl. Norma continues to say, “No voy allí, no voy allí.” [“I won’t go there, I won’t go there.”] The little girl begins screaming and crying. Norma is pulled to the ground by dozens of police, many wearing plastic shields over their faces. The little girl’s cries are heard vividly above the chatter of the crowds as the camera pans to police questioning spectators. Norma is then surrounded entirely by at least thirty policemen, still covered in the red blood-like fluid, and then shoved in the car while

1 Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.
resisting their pushing and shoving. The performance footage concludes with the credits, accompanied by footage of the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo shouting “asesino” [“murderer”] as the president walks into his home. The video’s reference to the Madres serves as the inspiration for this discussion of the Mujeres’ and Madres’ modes of performing “woman” (“Mujeres Creando” n.p.).

Figure 2

Embodying the Daily Self

The Madres and the Mujeres have thus far each been referred to as “performing.” “Acción 1” and the Madres’ weekly performance will continue to be referred to as “performances.” However, this requires some clarification seeing as the Mujeres Creando insist upon being activists, not artists and the Madres are simply asking for their children to be returned. It could, in fact, seem irreverent to name the fight against daily oppression and a mother’s plea for her child as a performance. The nature of the Mujeres’ “performance” could perhaps be seen as such more easily than the
Madres’ work. The Mujeres are more theatrical in their work – wearing costume type clothing, props, and so on. The Madres, however, are much less so. What could be more natural, more “everyday” than a mother communicating her pain and grief over a lost child? In being guided by Richard Schechner’s principle of “twice-behaved behavior,” irreverence can be instead converted into a mode of analyzing both the Mujeres’ and Madres’ performances as not antithetical to reality (*Performance Studies 9*).

The Madres de la Plaza de Mayo began their protest in response to the disappeared children of the “Dirty War,” as mentioned above. Diana Taylor, in *Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina’s "Dirty War,"* analyzes the different “scripts” instilled by the military during the “Dirty War.” One of these that particularly coincide with the Madres performance is that of “percepticide.” Diana Taylor crafts the term “percepticide” to give name to the policing of the citizen’s gaze in regards to the “disappearing.” She writes, “In order to qualify as ‘good’ Argentineans, people were forced to focus on the given-to-be-seen and ignore the atrocities given-to-be-invisible, taking place around them” (119). A woman and her husband sit at an outdoor café, and across the street a young man is being violently taken away by military officers. The military regime has written the script for the “good citizen,” one in which they continue their meal and avert their gaze. Seeing thus becomes dangerous. Taylor writes, “Percepticide blinds, maims, kills through the senses” (124).

The idea of a “dangerous seeing” inflicts a unique type of control upon each individual body, successfully converting an entire social body into a passive, “feminine” one. The Dirty War was a public battle of images. Diana Taylor points to the theatricality of the regime’s actions. The violence could have been done in secret, as the term
desaparecidos, signifies. The word for the now absent bodies indicates violence enacted in dark alleys, powerful in its invisibility and mystery. Instead, the military demanded the public either support their mission in its blindness, or be their next victim. Their stage was the street, the house, thus collapsing the public, the family, and the individual into one passive body. Resistance to a suspended disbelief would exclude the citizen from their ability to be a part of any body, and instead each would become a white, faceless silhouette on a city wall. This battle of images was maintained by disconnecting the spectator from their possession of action.

The military forced the population into a narrative of misidentification. The individual could maintain their position in a passive social body by averting their gaze. Both desaparecidos and those who looked away, were forced into a feminine role. The desaparecidos are feminized as they are pushed against walls, falling to the ground and being stood over by armed men. Both women and desaparecidos lack the force of a phallus or gun, and are thus made vulnerable. Those averting their gaze are subjected to the female narrative of the “non-seer.” The double performativity of the “non-seer” lies in the necessity of being seen as a “non-seer.” The femininity of the citizen is emphasized in being the spectacle, implicated in needing to be gazed upon, but not returning the gaze. The repetition of this double performativity of feminizing the Argentinian population resulted in individuals defined by the power of the gazes outside of themselves. The result was thus an entire society of disappeared, powerless bodies.

This is the society within which the Madres live – one in which the “senses have been maimed” by fear and patriarchal military forces. Another script within which the Madres and the Mujeres possesses is that of female. Judith Butler poses arguments about
the materiality of sex, arguing about the ways in which the power of heterosexual, phallogocentric world forms the actual matter of bodies, sex, and sexuality. Butler defines the phallus as “an eroticism structured by repetition and displacement, penetration and exposure” (*Bodies That Matter* 46). The Madres and Mujeres, therefore, performing female, are defined in opposition to the phallus. They are that which is displaced, that which is penetrated, that which is hidden. This passivity keeps mothers in households and allows for the description of the blind, terrified Argentinian citizenship to be that of “feminized.” This subjugation is what will unite the Mujeres Creando against patriarchal oppression. The Madres thus enter the Plaza de Mayo, in the line of policed gazes, to ask for the displaced, invisible bodies. The Mujeres enter the Plaza Murillo, spilling their own blood and refusing the script of female docility. Both enter the public domain as displaced, invisible bodies.

Some theorists have claimed the Madres took advantage of their maternal luxury. Just as there is a tinge of discomfort in calling their plea a performance, there is perhaps even greater irreverence in calling any part of their work a “luxury.” However, just as the Plaza de Mayo is a paradoxically safe trap, in which the Madres are protected while visible but can most easily be kidnapped while walking home, their use of motherhood as a mode of protest has its paradox. In possessing a female reproductive system of vagina, womb – of penetrable orifice, or empty space – the woman represents lack. Her “invisible contours” require the presence of a phallus to be filled and to have substance. In a phallogocentric world, this has been the female’s position. Diana Taylor writes of the Madres’ performance of absence in relation to that of the military’s of dominance:
Much of the military’s performance was a display of virility; the Madres’ spectacle was a public display of lack. They made it evident that they had no previous political identity or background, no expertise – they were just housewives; they had no power, no weapons, just absence, missing children (whom they repeatedly refer to as sons, thereby eliding the daughters once again), who were no longer there. *(Disappearing 203)*

The contrast of the spectacle of the military versus that of the Madres’ highlights the ways in which the Madres’ remain consistent with their role as Catholic mother, as was demanded by the junta. The government demanded the mothers look after their children and tend to the domestic space. Through percepticide the public and private spaces collided thereby preventing the Madres from fulfilling their maternal role. In moving from the home to the plaza, the Madres confront the collapse of the public and private spheres while insisting they sustain their role. They in turn acknowledge their role as “mother” as a result of their possession of a female, lacking, body while trying to maintain their role as effective Catholic mother.

The Mujeres Creando performers in “Acción 1” do not depend upon the supposed “luxury” of motherhood. “Acción 1” responds to disappeared bodies, those killed in rises to political power. The blood poured over the plaza and all over Norma Merlo’s body is not that of “my son” or “her daughter” but of all those killed. Onlookers are thus implicated in caring for these lost bodies, since there is not one mother attached to each absent child. Norma Merlo serves a mother-type role, but not that of a traditional mother. She has a vivid resemblance to “mother” when she puts the small girl on her back, carrying her through the crowds of police and spectators. Inside of the
young girls’ bag are hundreds of crosses marked with the name of dead individuals.

Merlo carries the metaphysical weight of these lost lives, now invisible bodies, on her body while demanding the crowds remember what they represent. Just as a mother would protect and honor her children, and just as a mother bears the weight of her children in gestation. The Mujeres refuse to perform the same “lack” as is performed by the Madres. The Mujeres make the loss blatantly visible, working against the script of the invisible, docile woman to demand visibility and recognition. They will employ references to the Virgin Mary, as will the Madres, inscribing the role of the specifically Catholic mother upon their performance.

(Re)performing Mother Mary

In a part of the world highly influenced by the Catholic Church, the symbolism of the Virgin Mary in the Madres’ and Mujeres’ performance is undeniable. Despite her position as a spiritual power and goddess in the Christian religion, her myth in fact accentuates the powerless position of the female body in patriarchal structure. Mary Daly, a radical feminist theologian, would consider the use of the Virgin Mary as a unifying, empowering symbol as simply an example of the female being caught in myth that made her powerless. She writes, “Patriarchal society revolves around myths of Processions. Earthly processions both generate and reflect the image of procession from and return to god the father” (M. Daly 37). In Daly’s work, Gyn/Ecology, she carefully parses apart the procession myth, hopeful to restore the possession of origin to women. The procession myths have resulted in a patriarchal relation in which all of existence comes from and returns to the same source. In Christian narrative God makes us, evil
forces captivate us, the Church releases us, and God the Father reclaims us into heaven. The female womb, obviously a necessity in the birth of humans, is systematically excluded from procession myths. Within the trinity, the Son comes from the Father and the Holy Ghost comes from the Son and the Father. The Virgin Mary is necessary in this procession only in that she possesses a womb. She, and women existing within patriarchal society, is thus robbed of their creative power and the loss of feminine self to a rigid cycle of birth and death that excludes the womb. Daly’s radical feminism calls for an affirmation of women’s original birth, and a “re-membering of our Selves” (39).

In embracing the symbolism of the Virgin Mary, the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo position themselves within the Catholic narrative, in which the woman waits for her womb to be impregnated, in which the mother waits for the return of her missing child. Mary Daly writes of the “disease” of the Virgin Mary: “Her disease more nearly resembles catatonia. Dutifully dull and derivative, drained of divinity, she merits the reward of perpetual paralysis in patriarchal paradise” (38). The myth of the Virgin Mary forbids the mother from reclaiming her child herself. She must instead ask, cry, wail to a force put in place by the patriarchal society that robbed her of her creative ability. The Madres cover their heads, fold their hands, cry out for their “sons” – however, their adoption of Mary’s “catatonia” is perhaps the success of their movement. Diana Taylor writes, “The virginal role allowed the women to perform traditionally acceptable ‘feminine’ qualities: self-sacrifice, suffering, irrationality” (Disappearing 196). They made themselves visible through their invisibility.

The Mujeres’ performance in “Acción 1” definitely calls attention to the deeply Catholic symbolism of a mother grieving over her child. However, Norma Merlo
resembles Jesus Christ much more than the Virgin Mary. She is preaching to a crowd, much like Jesus did. She appears to be performing a sort of self-sacrifice, covering herself in blood to represent the deaths of many. Norma Merlo’s body, however, as the site of all of these deaths, similar to Jesus’ sacrifice for the sins of all. Instead carrying a cross over her bloodied body she carries a child, signifying both the innocence lost in the deaths resulting from political institutions, as well as the ways in which the female body has been burdened by her possession of a womb. Instead of the idyllic motherhood performed by the Madres, the Mujeres perform a violent motherhood. The blood on her body and dumped at the spectator’s feet as a blood that could represent birthing fluid, menstrual blood, the blood of dead bodies. At the end of her performance the child is ripped off of her back, wailing and crying, her small hands covered with blood. The woman does not protect the child. The woman resists her arrest and insists upon her demands that lost lives be recognized.

The Mujeres play with, but also deny the Catholic narrative of the Virgin Mary wailing for her lost child. They in fact recreate this “procession myth,” to use Daly’s terminology, to effectively reclaim the Catholic narrative of the docile woman watching her son die on a cross. This, according to Daly, is a type of “radical feminism.” She writes:

Women who are willing to make the Journey of becoming must indeed recognize the fact of possession by the structures of evil and by the controllers and legitimators of these structures. But the solution is hardly “rebirth” (baptism) by the fathers in the name of male mating. Indeed, this “rebirth” – whether it is accomplished by the officially acknowledged religious fathers or by the directors
of derivative secular organizations, (e.g., television, schools, publishers of children’s books) – is the very captivity from which we are trying to escape, in order to find our own origins. Radical feminism is not reconciliation with the father. Rather it is affirming our original birth, our original source, movement, surge of living. This finding of our original integrity is re-membering our Selves.

(39).

Daly declares that in order to reclaim women’s sense of self, they must first recognize the systems by which they are controlled, and work outside of them. It cannot be a rebirth “within” these systems of male control: the police force, the Church, the state, the public space. Instead, there needs to be a search for women’s own beginnings. In abandoning father, or male, the female is thus no longer subject to the phallogocentric world to which Butler refers. The Mujeres claim agency over those oppressive narratives. Instead, the Mujeres take the mess of female blood and pour it over the patriarchal space of the public plaza, and refuse to play the role of mother their womb prescribes them.

The Madres de la Plaza de la Mayo and the Mujeres Creando embody the invisible in their respective performances. The very forces that they protest against, inscribe “mother” and “female” upon and through their bodies. In rearticulating their daily selves, they expose the invisible and force the public to see. Their embodiment creates an active language, one that is shaped and formed by the bodies, spaces, sounds, symbols, and gestures of their performances. The activeness of this language will pose a certain risk to these female bodies, resulting in death, imprisonment, and physical harm. The real and their performance are not antithetical to one another, but instead exist in a
webbed relationship emphasizing the malleable nature of “pre-existing scripts,” and the ways in which the body possesses agency over them.

*Intentional Textuality*

The ways in which the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo and the Mujeres Creando utilize text as a part of their performances transitions their role of biological women to political women. Firstly, the Madres play only one of the many roles of womanhood, that of mother. The Madres are also daughters, sisters, friends, lovers – but only mothers every Thursday at 3:30. Taylor writes:

> The Madres’ movement did not begin when the individual mothers became acquainted in their search for their children; it originated when the women consciously decided to protest and agitate *as* mothers. That *as* marked the conceptual distance between the essentialist notion of motherhood attributed to the Madres and the self-conscious manipulation of the maternal role – understood as performative – that makes the movement the powerful and intensely dramatic spectacle that is has been.” (*Disappearing* 194)

I would suggest that in subscribing to the role of political mother, the Madres created a disruptive space in which the “I” who is a biological mother transitions into the “I” who is consciously performing mother. The words across the Madres’ signs and painted on the ground upon which they walk acknowledge the demand for language to make the Madres’ bodies politically legitimate. The performance of gender is sustained to maintain the discourse of an ideal body and its ideal sex. While the body is necessary for the sustaining of discourse, it has a demand for language as well. The Madres carry signs, as
previously mentioned, that read, “Apración con vida de los desaparecidos.” With language, the Madres transcribe their purpose on their bodies. These words are a gesture away from biological motherhood to performative motherhood. They remain legitimate by sustaining the performance of motherhood dictated by the discourse of the ideal sex, but with words they work outside of “woman with womb” to express “woman with political purpose.” Most of the Madres in the seeds of the movement were illiterate, using the visibility of their bodies as power.

As political mothers, they could create a collective memory based upon the appearance of the disappeared. Working within the narrative of percepticide, the Madres confronted a nation that had been coerced into “not seeing.” Diana Taylor writes, “By ‘outing’ the disappearance of their children they came out as disappeared themselves. They appeared as the disappeared” (Disappearing 198). As previously mentioned, part of the brilliance in the Madres’ work is the conflation of public and private spaces. Mothers operate in the invisible domain, that of the home, while men move in and out of the public and private spaces. The visibility of the female body is a threat to the male who accounts for her, be it father or brother or husband. Part of the function of this invisibility is to perpetuate the object of male desire. The moment the quest is satisfied, desire is obliterated. The Madres, however, do not portray themselves as revealed female, sexualized beings. Instead, they visibly enhance their maternity. As the movement has developed women will often wear house slippers and robes, shawls, aprons – thereby avoiding being sexualized as objects of desire. This enhanced display of maternity ensures that the Madres are seen as desiring their lost children, and are not themselves being desired. Peggy Phelan writes, “Women and performers, more often than not, are
‘scripted’ to ‘sell’ or ‘confess’ something to someone who is in the position to buy or forgive” (163). The Madres avoid the female script to which Phelan refers by performing a very specific type of femininity. They instead produce an image of absence, performing two types of invisibility simultaneously. The Madres hold images of the disappeared children, stamped with the date of their disappearance. They thus disrupt time, shattering the senses and forcing the return to a moment in which the public “didn’t see.”

The Mujeres use language as a part of their larger political purpose, expanding that of the stage of “Acción 1.” Their graffiti insists that public space is public space. They acknowledge that private space is not their own, as it is implicated in patriarchal structure.

And so, out of all our work that we do, the graffiti’s (signed Mujeres Creando) are not anonymous — we put what we want, and everybody knows that Mujeres Creando is in this area, and if someone wants to put us in jail, he or she comes here and does it. Whenever we’ve gone out to do graffiti, we have been afraid, and we’re always afraid. But we’ve thought about our right to do it... Coca-Cola pays and paints, Repsol pays and paints, so why can’t we paint without paying? The problem isn’t that the walls are painted, the problem is that it’s not paid for. If we must pay for public space, then it’s a big contradiction in democracy. What’s public and what’s private? Streets are public space, the whole city’s a courtyard, not a jail hallway, where you go from the jail of your house to the jail of your office job... if it’s public, then everybody can use it. But if you pay for public space it becomes private. Public space doesn’t exist. Let’s start this discussion. What’s dirty? What’s clean? “You’re making my walls dirty!” Oh, so
when Coca-Cola contracts a painter, it doesn’t make the wall dirty? That’s an aesthetic concept. It seems to me that it has made the wall dirty in a disgusting way. And what we have done, our graffiti, that’s beautiful. (T. Daly 12)
The Mujeres Creando successfully connect words written on public walls, walls normally covered with “Coca-Cola” advertisements, to their breathing bodies. By doing so, they emphasize the ways in which the very walls within which all of society lives are connected to the repression of female bodies. Tara Daly in her article, “The Intersubjective Ethic of Julieta Paredes’ Poetic,” writes of the graffiti as a key piece of the Mujeres work. She discusses the ways in which their spray-paint poetics use language’s openness to engage readers in dialogue, as opposed to holding them in contemplation. The Mujeres often use grammatical ambiguity to make the language porous and absorbent to multiple subjects and objects. Daly points to the groups name as an example of this openness. “Their title can be read in two directions, Women Creating or Creating Women reflecting an open hermeneutic, and emphasizing the way the female (or any body) itself functions as subject and object in society, depending on the social context” (14). Their word thus represents something in continual evolution, progressing alongside bodies moving on the street and with the continual emergence of “othered” bodies.

The Mujeres’ manipulation of language empowers their struggle against historically repressive forces by utilizing the tools of the powerful. Those who have possessed physical power and the power of language have formed colonial identities. Just as the Mujeres appropriate Catholic imagery, they utilize the language that has empowered “delegitimate” bodies in order to imagine a new social hierarchy. The words
are originating from female bodies, creating a space within Bolivian social discourse for bodies that are not “normal.” They additionally gain “legitimacy,” using a tool of colonial forces, that of history. The Mujeres’ graffiti often engages with women from centuries before whose thoughts provided a foundation for a Latin American feminism. For example, the Mujeres often use Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz’s poetry. Tara Daly writes, “Like her, Mujeres Creando are the first to name themselves, ‘locas’ [crazies], or ‘impostoras’ [imposters] in an effort to de-legitimize others from interpelling their bodies as if they knew them” (25). By using text around the city in this way, the Mujeres preemptively protect the deconstruction of their bodies in performance. They name their bodies before another can, thus allowing themselves escape from the very colonial structures that have named “human” and “not human” for all of history. Just as Sor Juana Inés used her poetry to engage male authorities in debate about religious texts, the Mujeres Creando utilize graffiti to reclaim the public space and oppressive categorization. The Mujeres connect written word to living bodies, thereby imagining their physical bodies as a mode of historically legitimate creation.

A palimpsest is defined as the Oxford English Dictionary as, “A manuscript of piece of writing material on which the original writing has been effaced to make room for later writing but of which traces remain.” Maps black with pencil lead, walls layered with graffiti, public squares black with blood – also, perhaps, the bodies of the Madres and the Mujeres. As female bodies, the Madres and Mujeres enter the city streets coated with layers of social identity. They manipulate these layers in different ways to confront injustice, by burying those identities that would be detrimental to their cause. The Madres ensure that only the most invisible parts of their identities are performed – that
of the domestic mother. They mute the sexualized parts of their social and cultural identity in order to construct a political motherhood, a motherhood that has the ability to bring back their disappeared children. In Acción 1 the Mujeres manipulate their layers of social identity in order to create a violent motherhood. All of those parts of womanhood that have been feared are exposed. They are bloody, violent, and unbridled. Centuries before, Bartolina Sisa’s womanhood was exploited and dismembered, made into a public spectacle of control. Just as Sisa was utilized as a message for the disobedient, the Madres and Mujeres make a message of their own bodies by exploiting the very social roles that have controlled them. Performance makes possible the manipulation of the coded body, making the invisible, visible.
Chapter 3

“Pornography of the Soul”: Angelica Liddell’s Responsible Spectator

Theatre itself would hardly have come about without the hybrid act that an individual broke free from the collective, into the unknown, aspiring to an unthinkable possibility; it would hardly have happened without the courage to transgress borders, all borders of the collective.
– Hans Thies-Lehmann, Postdramatic Theatre

Abstract

In Angelica Liddell’s performance her body is site of political inquiry, making invisible forces visible. She implicates the spectator in a position of responsibility, thus making her work a mechanism for transformation of herself, the spectator, and society. Her aesthetic of shock alienates the audience, requiring a process of reflection that moves her performance off the stage and into reality.

Performing Human Nature

“When you perform, you have a knife and it’s your blood. When you’re acting, it’s a fake knife and ketchup” (Akers). Marina Abramovic, Yoko Ono, Orlan, Frank B, Ron Athey, are all part of a tradition of performance art that plays with the edge of the knife. Abramovic has been called the “grandmother of performance art,” now internationally known for the intensity of her work. Throughout her now decades long career, her “Rhythm” series is most often cited as one of her most daring. “Rhythm 0,” performed in Milan in 1974, was a piece Abramovic claims she “was ready to die for.” Set in a large gallery, she stood against a wall on a small platform, a table in front of her covered with objects for both pleasure and pain: a rose, a loaded gun, bread, paint, a knife, lipstick, and so on. For six hours she stayed there, limp and emotionless, while the
audience was instructed to do whatever they like with her body. They began with gentle, subtle actions like touching the rose to her face and painting her skin. As the piece developed, audience members cut off her clothes, carried her around the room, put a knife between her legs, and even held a loaded gun to her head. In a recent interview she admits, “The public had complete control and not me. Through that process I realized that if you give total freedom to the public, they really can kill you” (Abramovic).

Abramovic made a piece about how far the public can go. By challenging the limits of her own human body she challenges the limits of the spectator. At the end of “Rhythm 0,” Marina Abramovic stood up, tears streaming down her face, blood dripping from her neck, and clothes hanging in tatters. In the documentary The Artist is Present, she says, “The performance is over. I start moving, I start being myself, and at that moment, everyone runs away. They could not confront me as a person” (Akers). Marina Abramovic’s work directly and boldly confronts the audience, dissolving the clear distinction between art and reality. It is through this dissolution that she will simultaneously bring her audience closer and alienate them. She embeds them in her environment, and then isolates them to their own reflections and responses to her work.

Abramovic is one of most well-known female performance artists creating work at this intensity. Closely aligned with the methods of Marina Abramovic is Angelica Liddell, a female performance artist from Spain. Both Abramovic and Liddell’s work is undeniably political – its disruptive qualities expanding beyond the stage and into “real life.” Both of their work asks: what is art other than revealing human nature?

Angelica Liddell will distinguish herself from Marina Abramovic in that she functions in a more traditional theatre setting. She occupies a genre that Lehmann calls
“postdramatic theatre.” This term has previously been defined, but should be revisited in regards to the differences in Liddell’s work to that of the aforementioned performers. She occupies staged settings, a seated audience, actors, and a script of some sort. Liddell’s work is not traditional dramatic theatre in any sense. Hans Thies-Lehmann traces the development of the relationship between theatre and drama. He writes, “Theatre and drama have existed, and still exist, in a relationship of tension-ridden contradictions” (46). He asserts that his term “postdramatic theatre” requires an understanding of the “mutual emancipation and division” between theatre and drama. The main difference, according to Lehmann, between theatre and drama is that drama is heavily dependent upon the text. He makes vivid that it is not that theatre no longer has text, it is simply that theatrical modes of expression have transformed. This knowledge stems from his reflection that theatre existed before the development of writing, rising out of mimesis through ritual, ceremony, dance, and so on. With the advent of the written language, however, literature dominated cultural hierarchy and became the “authority of Reason.”

Aristotle and Boal: Poetry and Politics

In occupying a more traditional theatre setting, a seated audience and a stage for most of her performances, Liddell is unavoidably implicated in the history of theatre as is laid out by Lehmann. Postdramatic Theatre articulates the importance of Aristotle and Augusto Boal in the tradition of theatre, and as touch points for understanding the ways theatre has been transformed. Boal opens his 1974 text, Theatre of the Oppressed, by condemning Aristotle’s views of art, more specifically theatre. Aristotle was insistent that
art and politics occupy two different spheres, entirely. He calls Aristotle’s two-sphere system one of coerciveness. He claims that Aristotle’s view is that of the ruling classes, thus repressing the audience. If art is just poetics, and not politics, the spectator is held in their seat, prevented from enacting what Boal calls their potentially “illegal tendencies,” such as those the audience expresses in “Rhythm 0” (Boal 24). The first chapter of Boal’s *Theatre of the Oppressed* constructs and then reconstructs Aristotle’s viewpoint to develop into Boal’s “theatre of the oppressed.”

In *Poetics*, Aristotle claims that art is what recreates the creative principle of created things. Thus, art tends towards the perfection of nature. Art possesses the movement of nature towards its final flawless form. Aristotle is very aware of the imperfections of nature as well. He understands that humans get sick, trees die, nations erupt in war – but nature yearns towards perfection and where it fails, art corrects. He claims art, and science as well, transform the human experience by responding to these failures. We weave together clothing to protect our fragile human skin from the elements. We build bridges to respond to our inability to traverse bodies of water. With the suggestions of nature, art and science make possible the transformation of the experience of living. This intertwining of art and science and a yearning towards perfection is what Boal conceives of as politics. He deems Aristotle’s thoughts on art and science as apolitical as total contradiction. What else is politics, Boal claims, other than that which controls the way humans exist in the world?

Boal claims that Aristotle’s tragedy is even more political in that it is dedicated to imitating human acts as are determined by the rational soul. Aristotle describes the rational soul as being divided into three parts: faculties, passions, and habits. Faculties are
that which all humans are able to do, but they may not actually do: potentiality. The passions, however, are facts. A passion is an enacted faculty. A repeated passion becomes habit. Habits are worthy of representation in tragedy in that they do not just happen on a whim. In their repeated-ness they merit imitation because the goal of habit is to achieve a certain “good.” Aristotle claims “good” is the aim of all human action. The supreme good, to which all action leans, is happiness. A human in search of happiness, according to Aristotle, will tend towards virtuous behavior. Virtue is neither excess nor deficiency of passion, but a middle ground. When humans fail to meet the perfection of virtuous action, art is there to “perfect” their flaws. Aristotle deems this correction of human action as catharsis.

Boal’s questions erupt from Aristotle’s claims of catharsis. He asks, “Catharsis is correction: what does it correct? Catharsis is purification: what does it purify?” (27). Theatre must embody change, according to Boal, not a static ideal. Aristotle’s tragedies enact a sort of change, but one that is predictable in that it will always result in the upholding of a set of societal morals. The virtues of the tragic hero are generally challenged and misunderstood at the beginning of the tragedy. Boal claims that only bad playwrights would make a mistake such a revealing the perfect heroic virtues at the very beginning: “Theatre is change and not simple presentation of what exists: it is becoming and not being” (28). Pity and fear are utilized to link the spectator to the character, and through this connection the spectator is purged of something. Catharsis corrects something. The process is as such. First, the character achieves the pity of the spectator. The character, along with the spectator, experiences the fall of the hero. Secondly the hero realizes their errors, the reason for their fall, along with the spectator. Thirdly, the
character suffers greatly for his error. Catharsis occurs when the audience becomes terrified enough of the hero’s catastrophe to be purified at least temporarily of the threat of their own faults.

Boal claims that this type of coercive tragedy is absolutely unfit for periods of revolution. Boal composed *Theatre of the Oppressed* while in exile. As a cultural activist of sorts, he was perceived as a threat by the Brazilian military regime and kidnapped, tortured, and forced into exile in Argentina. Both he and Liddell are fugitives, to some degree, and thus are aligned in their views of theatre. Boal is exiled, and Liddell, as will soon become clear, views her suffering as a result of various forms of societal oppression. Their goals, thus, orbit together in their desire to expose and *reconstruct* the forces that cause their suffering. Boal seeks to reclaim a theatre that has been seized by the ruling class and used as a tool for domination. In the Foreword he explains the importance of current events to emphasize the implications of his book. He claims that in Latin America as he is writing, the barriers set in place by the ruling class are in ruin. Boal’s text proves that theatre can be a tool for collectively imagining a new society out of the ruins of these barriers. Both he and Liddell articulate a theatre as a weapon that will bring about change. Theatre, in Boal’s text, is always political, and has the ability to show the means of carrying out a new vision of the world. While Aristotle’s tragedy depends upon a set of accepted values, a stability that permits the experience of catharsis in the spectator, Boal and Liddell’s theatre defies any comfort of stability. Their art will not yield towards perfection but instead to stimulate the spectator to engage in action and contemplate not what already exists, but what should exist. It is not the change of
the hero that purges the spectator of their flaws, but instead an involvement of the spectator in the action – literally and metaphorically – that will enact transformation.

Boal and Liddell’s work is undeniably political in its rejection of catharsis for a theatre that makes invisible political forces, visible on its performing bodies. In Boal’s words, theatre is “interrelated under the domain of a sovereign art which deals with all [humans], with all they do, and all that is done for them” (11). In Boal and Liddell’s theatre, the body of both actor and spectator are inherently political. Boal incorporates the spectator’s body often through the means of participation: having the spectator build the plot through suggestion, physically move actors’ bodies, and so on, reminiscent of Abramovic’s “Rhythm 0.” The quality of change that he views as crafting the theatre is something both spontaneous and embodied. In the works analyzed in this chapter, Liddell will implicate the theatre in an aesthetic of responsibility to the happenings of the stage by offering up her body. In the words of Lehmann, “Postdramatic theatre aims at the public exhibition of the body, its deterioration in an act that does not allow for a clear separation of art and reality” (166).

Boal and Liddell invade the realities of the spectator with their work, incorporating the spectator, and enacting a mutual creation of narrative and physicality – an implication of the theatre and the bodies in it existing symbiotically. Political forces are alive in theatre, existing through and within its human bodies. It is this ability to bring societal forces alive that makes Angelica Liddell, a female performance artist who has been compared to Abramovic, so relevant in a discussion of Aristotle and Boal. Her work operates with a vivid knowledge of the way political forces act upon the female body and an acute awareness of theatre’s ability to transform these forces.
Gathering of Bodies

Liddell insists on communicating her art as non-traditional content, with modes outside of the “authority of Reason.” Lehmann writes of postdramatic theatre, “We can clearly see here that theatre does not attain its political, ethical reality by way of information, theses and messages; in short: by way of its content in the traditional sense” (187). Information, theses, and messages are thus communicated on and through Liddell’s body, apart from the traditional modes of translatable messages. Liddell’s body is the site where “the authority of Reason” is shattered. It is not the middle ground of Aristotle’s virtue that will work between the spectator and Liddell, but instead a lack of reason that will occur with, on, and to her body (Lehmann167). She denies a search for catharsis for one of intensity and immersion. The only purging or correction that will occur is that of her letting her own blood or wailing a cry of pain – these will not be a purification, but instead will be trapped in the as something the spectator must reflect upon.

The intensity of Liddell’s work requires a gathering of bodies. Liddell makes her body porous and absorbent; embedding herself into her performance in a way that sacrifices herself to the forces she performs. Two hundred years before Liddell’s performance, Baudelaire will be on a similar search for art’s intensity and for a way to be embedded in his world. He thus conceives of a metaphorical “man of the crowd.” This is a man whose life is a prism of absorption in the city street – in a site of “gathered bodies.” In “A Painter of Modern Life” he writes:

His passion and profession are to become one flesh with the crowd. […] it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, in the midst of the
fugitive and the infinite. To be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home; to see the world, to be at the centre of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world – such are a few of the slightest pleasures of those independent, passionate, impartial natures which the tongue can but clumsily define. (68)

The “man of the crowd” is entirely absorbed into human energy. His private wants and needs are somehow universal. His home is an experience of being embedded into his environment – being tousled left and right by passers by and moving with anonymity. I would suggest that this is what Angelica Liddell invites her audience to do. She asks them to be tousled by her private passions, and to recognize that her fragility is also their own. Liddell demands her audience take part in an energy that is not distinctly their own, but human. In their staged setting the spectator is anonymous, face in the shadows and not being asked to illicit any sort of physical response to Liddell’s actions. Liddell’s spectator is asked to contemplate their flesh alongside Liddell’s, the breaks in her own skin, the wails pulsing through her body, representing an excess of human passion only released through her personal catharsis – one denied to her spectator. Her pieces often have little press, and are mainly spread by word of mouth. Regardless, her fans always find her work, and wrap around buildings in lines. It is perhaps because she embeds herself and her spectator in the same world, one outside of the bounds of language, traditional time, and dependent upon the flesh of gathered bodies.

Liddell calls her work “pornography of the soul,” in that it exposes the intimate parts of herself to a public audience, problematizing their role as a viewer. She explains: “To speak of the human, we have to break the barrier of the modesty. To muddy
ourselves in awareness, in the human condition we have to undo ourselves from correctness, from the social pact. We have to work as if we are closing the door to our bedrooms and are alone” ("Performance Prospectus: Angelica Liddell, Te Haré Invencible Con Mi Derrota"). When alone in a bedroom, there is the potential for complete exposure. Within the spectator she inspires a feeling of peering at something forbidden. Similar to watching pornography, there is a moment in the spectator’s mind of thinking, “This is not allowed.” In imagining her solitude as she performs, she implies that the “barriers of modesty” do not matter. There is thus the possibility of becoming “undone.” In imagining her work this way the masks of social limitations are dropped, allowing us to become distinctly aware of the possibly taboo human condition, of our own condition. The human condition in Angelica Liddell’s work truly erupts straight from her soul. Instead of a change that leads to the exposure of social standards, as in tragedy of Aristotle, Liddell exposes the dregs of her private self, making ruins of the social barriers that exist in mediated space. The spectator is with her in her bedroom, watching her body be seized by the spirit of her work – an eruption of her passions. Her passions are released by exploring that which represses them, the invisible forces she conceives as controlling her physical body.

Her theatre is reminiscent of that imagined by Artaud: one of extremes that creates a space of potential for change. She makes the intimate public, and thus articulates a spirit to her work reminiscent of the theatre in Artaud’s collection of essays, Theater and its Double. In the essay that opens his text, “Theater of Cruelty,” he imagines a theatre that “wakes us up: nerves and heart”. He rejects the tyrant of language in theatre, just as does Boal and Liddell. Artaud calls for a change in the theatre of his time, to be
somewhere between thought and gesture: “Words say little to the mind; extent and objects speak; new images speak, even new images made with words” (18). A theatre that “wakes us up” is one that will first touch all of our senses. It will make us alive to the world, absorbent and tingling. Individual prisms of absorption, the spectator becomes alive to their condition as the cruelty of the theatre attacks them. In a dream like fashion, the senses, the body, the mind, are all embedded in a physical, yet virtual, sensorial, yet imaginary experience. “Charged by physical energy, such immediately spatialized body-time aims to communicate directly with the spectators’ nervous system, not to inform them. The spectators do not observe but experience themselves inside of a time-space” (Lehmann 152). With less dependence upon text, the body of the performer has the ability to engage the senses of the spectator. As Lehmann articulates, the need to experience instead of lazily receive information, yanks them from positions of passivity.

Ruptured Time

Liddell refuses her audience a position of passivity by creating a visible disconnect between what the spectator’s see and what they experience. She does this by reconstructing the boundary between self and other, between language and body, and expectation and reality. The boundary between self and other is ruptured by her insistence on performing her most intimate emotions. In Te haré invencible con mi derrota [I Will Make You Invincible With My Defeat], Liddell uses her desire to die to explore the human body’s mortality. She uses her sadness as a force to seek out complicity with a dead cellist, Jacqueline Du Pré. In an interview with On the Board, a Seattle performing arts organization, Liddell says: “That’s what I am looking for among the dead, an
understanding of why I (who little by little have become a bundle of anxiety, of fear, of loneliness and of mistrust), why I (who doesn’t want to abandon life, but does not want to die), why I continue living while Jacqueline does not” (“Performance Prospectus”). Liddell uses the stage to create a fantasy for herself, within which she can explore her desire to die, her personal suffering, by imagining a world within which she can communicate with the dead. She ruptures real time, that of mortality, to implicate the spectator to occupy a time specific to her emotions and pain.

It is this creation of a ruptured time and a space between mortality and immortality that Lehmann claims “harbors danger.” He writes, “For any rupture in the structure of time, we read, would harbor the danger that the spectator becomes aware of the difference between original and copy, reality and image, and is – inevitably – steered towards his time, the real time. Then, without any control, he could let his imagination run wild, reflect, occupy himself with reasoning or else dream” (161). It is this lack of control in the response of the spectator that has evolved theatre – from Aristotle to Boal to Artaud to Lehmann. In creating a space in which time operates differently, the spectator is destabilized and searches for a concept of time they understand. When Liddell exposes a time distinctly hers – an intimate space of immortality and suffering – the spectator must grapple for their own sense of time. In Lehmann’s words, this poses a danger in that they are destabilized. In this destabilization, however, the spectator is forced out of their passivity and let free, to some extent. They are given an opportunity to “run wild,” dreaming and imagining somewhere between “real time” and Liddell’s proposed time. The spectator is thus responsible for his or her own mental synthesis, making sense of what does not make sense.
Similarly to her rupturing of the spectator’s experience and perception of time in her performance, Liddell transforms language in her work. She converts language from a tool of reason and understanding to one of chaos and repression. Her work conceives of this conversion as an act of exposure, using her body to make invisible forces visible.

Both *El año de Ricardo* [*The Year of Richard*] and *Yo no soy bonita* [*I Am Not Pretty*] explicitly attack language as a force of repression. *El año de Ricardo* addresses the use of language in political manipulation. *Yo no soy bonita* specifically confronts language as a pedagogical tool for children. Each work establishes a relationship between the repression of the invisible forces of language and Liddell’s body – dissolving the literal use of language for one that displaces the spectator from his or her preconceived views.

Liddell confronts ways the written word plays a pedagogical role in our youth, molding the position of our bodies in relation to the rest of the world. She exposes language’s role in her coming of age, and her rupture from it in *Yo no soy bonita*. She stands in front of a stack of mattresses, in a moment of autobiographical rant. Between the mattresses are children’s books, those that were read to her as a child. She is dressed in a black cloak, with long black tangled hair, holding a microphone and wandering the stage. As she stops and stands in front of the mattresses she takes each book from between the mattresses and raises it above her head. These books have been given to her from various people in her life – friends, family. With the first book above her head she says, “Por ejemplo, *El fin de semana de los cinco*, a cinco hijos de puta aquí está.” [“For example, *The Weekend of the Five*, and five sons of a whore are here.”] Liddell muddies the
titles of each book with “hijos de puta, hijos de puta.” [“Sons of whores, sons of
whores.”] She continues reading off titles, microphone in hand, then throwing the books
to the floor. “Ah, Heidi. El hijo de puta principal que es Heidi, no?”[“Ah, Heidi. The
principal son of a whore is Heidi, isn’t she?”] She disperses her commentary with “Una
puta como yo” [“A whore like me.”] This moment is clearly a criticism of the way
women’s identities form. The sacristy of childhood is invaded by texts that craft the
female into “puta,” or whore (Liddell Yo No Soy Bonita). These words had been given to
her by loved ones, and became a part of her understanding of the world. Of course they
did not literally call her a whore, but Yo no soy bonita confronts the injustice of the roles
that have been ascribed to females by societal structures. Specifically calling attention to
the ways in which language articulates the sexualization of the female body. “Whore” is
her takeaway from these texts as a word that implies the position of her body in the
world – that of sexual object. This connection between the word and her physical body
is emphasized in El año de Ricardo.

El año de Ricardo is a two hour-long monologue, a tour de force of rage and
hysteria. El año de Ricardo is the third part of her Trilogía de actos de resistencia contra la muerte
[Trilogy of Acts of Resistance Against Death], and is an adaptation of Shakespeare’s
Richard III. Liddell remains on stage for the entirety of the adaptation, with one other
male character. Liddell plays Ricardo while her counterpart plays Catesby. She says of
Ricardo, “[He] is a mixture of insanity and ambition. We identify with him. Ricardo
shows us how democratic mechanisms are used to abuse power, cause suffering, and
compensate for personal faults” (Liddell "Entrevista a Angelica Liddell En El Festival
Internacional De Buenos Aires"). Shakespeare’s play is less about the origins of power
but more about its manifestations, emphasizing the expression of power as something bestial, as reflected by Richard III’s internal corruption and external deformities. The majority of the characters in Richard III engage in their own downfall, knowingly. Lady Anne, for example, lets herself be seduced by Richard even though she knows he will kill her. Manipulation through language is the most “successful” act of power – Richard has great control over his use of words, at times manipulating even the audience to momentarily sympathize with him, most often because of his physical deformities. There is an overarching theme of language being the source of survival (Shakespeare). Liddell will suffer under the force of language in El año de Ricardo. She screams and snorts, words seem as though they are flung from her body, dissolving in the foam that drips from her mouth. She twists herself in pain and contorts and spasms. She rants, she shouts, she mumbles her monologue. Her script is truly provocative, but in the use of her physicality we see her exorcising of the “democratic mechanisms” to which she refers.

Liddell specifically calls attention to sound as a force of control, emphasizing speech as a force that dictates the actions of physical corpus. The opening scene of El año de Ricardo tears through the silence of the prologue with a sort of obnoxious song, blaring a chorus of children’s voices. The song is fast paced and intense. Liddell matches the pace and progression of the song. She sort of stumbles to a bed, lays on the ground and props her legs up, doing sit ups long enough for the audience to be concerned for her exhaustion. She then stands, stumbles around, as though the song is pressing weight into her body, flinging her about. She kicks; she sways a bit, and then begins her monologue, the pace of her words matching the beat of the sound and the speed of her previous movements. It is nearly impossible to understand what she is saying, as her
mouth runs and runs and does not once stumble over mouthfuls of script. Liddell’s body, her words, her movement – is, as Lehmann states, both the subject and object of the stage (the world).

Angelica Liddell calls attention to the ephemeral nature of performance through a rant on the endurance of written language. The mode in which Angelica delivers the monologue in Scene 9 varies from mumbling to herself, to lecturing, to shouting -- all while perched on a bail of hay, washing her feet in a bin of water (see Figure 1). She begins her monologue by saying, “Quiero una lista de escritores. Una lista completa.”[“I want a list of writers. A complete list.”] She then begins to ask about the Tibetans, the Lebanese, the Peruvians, the Armenians. She answers her own question by concluding that they were all slaughtered and then makes a realization: “Debe de haber una vida espiritual de la palabra. Eso es, una vida espiritual de la palabra.”[“There must be a spiritual life of the word. That’s it, the spiritual life of the word.”] In this section of her monologue Liddell acknowledges the mortality of the writer’s body, but the transcendental life of their language – a “spiritual life”.
Liddell establishes a metaphor of the “sweating word” to account for the ways in which language is enacted upon the physical body. Even though the writers have died, no, have been slaughtered, the spirit of their word remains alive. There is something quite Biblical about her expression of the spirit of the word, as that which most often refers to the Holy Spirit. The spirit of the word becomes incarnate in a human body, that of Jesus Christ. Similar to the Biblical references of the spirit of the word, Liddell claims that words are means of transmission. This transmission, she argues in her monologue, has the ability to contaminate. In language’s porousness, implicated in the ability of the word to “sweat,” it can become a part of the living world. Its pores are that which allow it to seep out its contamination, enacting a physical force upon the body. It is this ability to be both material and immaterial that allows language to operate outside of time.

In Scene 11 of *El año de Ricardo*, Liddell explore the ability of language to exist beyond the physical body, like a soul of sorts. She is talking about a cemetery, and says,
“Encárgate de que el cementario de los nuestros lo diseña un arquitecto importante. Lo malo de nuestros muertos es que son reales.” [Take care of our cemetery designed by an important architect. The trouble with our dead is that they are real.] Just as she does in Te haré invencible con mi derrota, Liddell plays with the forces of mortality as something malleable and alive. The dead are “real,” here. The words in their epitaphs inscribed on their gravestones are “sweating.” Language can eternally represent the dead, making them “real.” These words thus become a timeless authority of sorts. What feels complex here is that Liddell expresses the spirit of language through a non-language based art form. The spirit of the language is that which enacts invisible forces on her body – it is the reason she is flung about the stage as she delivers her monologue. She acknowledges that language has the power to make the dead real, even past the existence of their body. In an art form that expressively uses her body, she condemns language’s permanence. Liddell states that although language works through her body and upon her body, she condemns it as the authority of reason. She will transmit her message using her corpus, a type of content outside of the timeless “authority of Reason.” In her rejection of the spirit of language, Liddell challenges her spectators to consider their own experience of language.

Liddell offers up her body as a physical expression of the repression enacted by language, thus challenging her spectator to consider their own position in regards to language. Liddell draws her observer close to her experience of suffering and pain. As mentioned previously, her work truly erupts from her soul. In her scripts and in her gestures it is a work that is personal and about her. She thus draws the spectator close to her, asking them to know the limitations and possibilities of what she can do with her
body. In *Yo no soy bonita*, she calls awareness to the ways language has socially distorted her body. In *El año de Ricardo*, she emphasizes the manipulative powers of language, as we watch her body be possessed by its invasive abilities. As language dictates her physical suffering to differing degrees, the spectator becomes deeply aware that he or she possesses language. They are meant to say, “I could have given her that children’s book.” “I possess language, am I responsible for her suffering?” Since gestures and physicality are not bound and complete like her childhood books or Shakespeare’s prose, the spectator must acknowledge her language as one that is living and present, and thus implicates them in a position of active participation.

*Aesthetic of Pain*

Liddell uses her experience of pain to further implicate her audience in an aesthetic of responsibility. She often cuts her skin in her performances, emphasizing the intensity of her passions and the forces that act upon their release. A poignant example of her use of her blood as an aesthetic is in *Tres actos de desobediencia* [Three Acts of Disobedience]. The series of three works opens with *Lesiones incompatibles con la vida* [Lesions Incompatible With Life]. *Lesiones* is the first of the three works and Liddell describes it as the following:

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Tiene su origen en una decisión: No quiero tener hijos. Mi cuerpo se convierte en una agresión contra la sociedad. Mi cuerpo se convierte en protesta. Durante un año enfrenté una encantadora fotografía familiar de mi infancia a la cartelería urbana, a los mendigos, a los supermercados, a mi vida cotidiana. Lo hice para degradarla. Intenté que cada imagen fotografiada fuera una batalla. Y al mismo
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tiempo una derrota. [Lesiones] es una rabia, una furia, un paso más hacia mi proceso de extinción. Es el primer acto de desobediencia.

[It has its origin in a decision: I do not want to have children. My body is converted into an aggression against society. My body is converted into protest. For one year I confronted everything from beloved family photographs to an urban billboard, to beggars, to supermarkets, to my daily life. I did it to degrade it. I intended for each image to be a battle. And at the same time a defeat. Lesions is an anger, a fury, a passage through my process of extinction. It is the first act of disobedience.] (Liddell "En El Marco De Fiesta España 08")

This section of monologue is key to understanding the progression of these three works: her body is her protest. Her treatment of her body expresses the way it has been controlled by societal, patriarchal expectations. In using her body as a tool she defames the forces that have controlled her and in the expression of these forces she creates anew. For example, in Yo no soy bonita as performed abroad and La desobediencia as is performed in Spain, Liddell is “beating her vagina with pebbles, before inserting them, while chanting ‘mi cuerpo es mi protesta, no quiero tener hijos’” (Gonzalez 229).

Another moment in Yo no soy bonita, Liddell slices her legs, soaking up the blood with bread and eating it (see Figure 2). In both of these scenes Liddell takes part in what Lehmann calls a “deeply black ceremony of the body.” While Liddell is inflicting the pain upon herself, in these works that are distinct commentary on the unjust societal treatment of the female body, it becomes clear that it is not her that holds the blade. Her body is her protest, an emblem of a violent world. Gonzalez writes, “These moments are clearly intended to stun and to disturb, to prick the soul by wounding the eyes” (230).
The will of something, someone greater than herself inflicts these wounds and introduces the reality of death. The spectator confronts death alongside Liddell, a death that could in fact be deemed murder.

In performing the breaking of her skin to an audience, Liddell challenges the spectator to feel pity, fear, and responsibility for that which she is performing upon her body. For example, *Te haré invencible con mi derrota* involves the explicit infliction of pain upon her body (see Figure 3). Liddell cites this work as the transformation of pain into something beautiful. Liddell pricks her fingertips with needles, squeezing the blood out of the taut skin. Everything she touches will now be inked with her red prints. Her blood is now a part of the language of the stage. After watching her wound herself, staring at the blood droplets forming on her fingers, it is no longer violent blood. This is the blood of her human passions being purged from her body. These moments in her work inspire fear in the audience – reminiscent of the emotions Aristotle wishes to stir in his audience.
members. He, too, strives for art to achieve something beautiful, something good.

However, Liddell conceives of the beauty of pain the process of it being exposed, not of its expression of something virtuous. She needs her audience to witness the rupture of the intimate boundaries of her body, in order to fulfill what she calls her “bestial necessity.” In an interview she says:

The aesthetic choices are absolutely linked to a bestial necessity to place one’s suffering in front of another, yes, any aesthetic choice is connected to a base psychological mechanism, the necessity of the sick person to create a self-portrait, to examine his or her own pain, to observe him or herself like a rat, taking in each of his or her own movements. (Liddell "Entrevista a Angelica Liddell En El Festival Internacional De Buenos Aires")

This quotation makes ambiguous who is the “sick person.” While Angelica could be conceived of as sick, twisted, demented for harming herself, the same could easily be said about the spectator. She calls the need to be witness or have a witness to your pain a “base psychological mechanism.” Here she reveals, but does not resolve, something about human nature. The spectator comes to realize that her will is something conditioned. The fingers holding the razor cutting open her kneecaps are in fact held by social structures. The will of the performer is the will of something larger than herself. Her work confronts the spectators with questions: “Am I sick for watching this? Am I responsible for her pain?”

Angelica Liddell thwarts catharsis. Aristotle’s catharsis depends upon the spectator identifying with the performer, or the hero. They say, “I see myself in them, thus I feel pity for their downfall, and fear that the same could happen to me.” Aristotle
resolves these fears by demonstrating the virtuous actions that correct the hero’s downfall. The change from failure to success is predictable, moving along a grooved progression towards socially and politically accepted virtue. The stability of his conclusion is sweet for the audience member – solution filled. Liddell trades a tame grooved path for the disruption of human passion. Her theatre is one of becoming, just as unpredictable and unbridled as the passions she expresses. The intensity of the treatment of her body does not provide the sweet comfort of fulfilled expectation but instead inspires shock and fear. The spectator desires escape. Shock and fear disconnect the spectator from Liddell, but make them intimately aware of their passions and what is alive in the world. The blood she purges and the passion she releases, for her own personal catharsis, is not intended for purification but for explicit exposure.
When pain is experienced and not represented, perception becomes an experience of responsibility, in which the spectator has an unavoidable implication in the aesthetic. The audience member witnesses the performer making herself a victim. In the process of using her own will to harm herself, Liddell consistently draws her viewer close, to view the most intimate boundaries between herself and the world, to witness the rupturing of her very skin. She invites them to be embedded deeply into her world, and in doing so she shatters their experience of the real, so that the spectator is left alienated between Liddell’s experience and that of the “real.” They are thus forced to take part in the political, to make something of the ruins of these transgressed borders.

Constructive Reflection

Brecht claims that only shock can achieve understanding. He writes, “When something seems ‘the most obvious thing in the world’ it means that any attempt to understand the world has been given up”. The spectator will say, “I’d never thought it – That’s not the way – extraordinary, hardly believable – It’s got to stop,” and so on (Brecht 71). The messages that Liddell transmits, thus comes from the destabilization of alienating the spectator with the unexpected. Only when the spectator’s understanding of the real is replaced with that of Liddell’s fantastic structures will they be forced to dream, wonder, and drift between the real and fantasy. They are coerced into a liminal space between understandings, and in the processing of this confusion; Liddell’s work can create anew.

The moment in which the spectator is expected to create something of the remains of what Liddell has disrupted is not during the performance, but afterwards. The
change that she endures and enacts upon the stage, a literal and symbolic change, moves into the “real” when her spectators leave the theatre. Through her aesthetic of shock and fear, Liddell is able to make a performance that requires reflection, thus transmitting her message beyond the time and space of the stage and into reality. The experience of being startled or shocked – perhaps by Liddell’s grunts and convulsions, her blood covered knees – entails a gap between perception and understanding. She does this with her rupturing of time, language, and boundary between herself and the spectator, all of which can be included in her aesthetic of shock. It is this startling of the spectator that Liddell’s work can imagine anew, as is imagined by Boal. The imagining of a new society occurs as a result of the alienation of the audience, and the demand upon them to remember and contemplate the performance.

This liminal space that occurs during the “now” of Liddell’s performance is one of lack. The gap between perception and understanding occurs as the performance is happening, the “now” is a gap created by shock and fright. We are startled into a rupturing of our expectations and our observations. “This experience of lack takes place at the seam of time” (Lehmann 143). We are shoved into a space of confusion, between our shock and our understanding. How, then, is the spectator to deal with this lack? Lehmann offers the following: “The task of the spectator is no longer the neutral reconstruction, the re-creation and patient retracing of the fixed image but rather the mobilization of their own ability to react and experience in order to realize their participation in the process that is offered to them” (135). The need of the spectator to act and respond, in some way, is that which classifies performance art as an unmediated experience of the real. Liddell is a provocative, present body, as opposed to a traditional
actor embodying another figure. This is not a passive fantasy, but an active role of observation and thus participation. A participation that extends into the real world, asking the spectator to reconstruct and challenge that which Liddell has dissolved.

The opening of the film *Un chien andalou* is that of a moon, turned eyeball being sliced in half by a razor blade (see Figure 4). The intensity of the image is meant to frighten, to disarm the viewer, but also calls attention to the nature of what we will see. The eye being sliced in half is a message: your perception and your personal experience will be ruptured. In Buñuel’s surrealist film, just as in the work of Liddell, we are forced to challenge what our eyes intake. While watching Liddell perforate her body, inject needles into her fingertips and ooze blood from her knees, there is an aspect of nonsense. Not in the humorous sense, but nonsense that leaves a gap between observation and understanding. The gap is not resolved onstage, as is in Aristotle’s tragedy. The corrective catharsis is rejected for a challenging of the ways humans exist in the world. The spectator is pulled from their position of passivity, forced to ask themselves how they are implicated in Liddell’s pain, and then left alienated. She brings them close, shocks them with her destruction of time, language, expectation, and then her performance ends. The spectator is left with memories of blood droplets and a
convulsing body – images that “prick the soul by wounding the eyes” (Gonzalez 230).

What is left is rubble of questions as to how humans take part in the invisible forces that distort and destroy the bodies we occupy.
Conclusion

The efforts of this analysis are not meant to be an articulation of the ways in which performance is “better than” other ways of knowing. It is meant, however, to imagine the incorporation of the physical body into the ways knowledge is produced, transmitted, and received. Writing has become a stand in for the body. Binding things like sensation and bodily cravings in words. Performance offers a poetic interruption of this boundedness, the stability that comes with the permanence and immobility of words on a page. By calling attention to liveness of the human body, performance has the ability to destabilize our construction of identity and the “other” as is constructed by disembodied ways of knowing.

Our present time is one that many have called intensely performative. The advance of the Internet has rocketed us into a world that demands the rearticulation of identity on multiple pixelated platforms. Social media asks of us to curate our identities in image and word, performing our desired self with the absence of a body. These digital realms permit a self that can be genderless and without race – a virtual fantasy so distinct from the experience of living. We are indeed socially coded beings. The assumptions made about our varying physicalities dictate many facets of how we exist in the world. The experience of living, of possessing a body, becomes suppressed into a format that makes identity easily understood via categorization. There is, after all, great pleasure in understanding.

It is performance that creates knowledge by disrupting the narratives we live by. This work explores the ruptures in female scripts. These pages contain four examples of women manipulating the scripts of the ideal female to achieve a destabilization of their
identity. It is in this process of rupture that these scripts are left in pieces. The spectator is abandoned somewhere between the script that helps them understand the world, and the performance’s disruption. It is these moments of disruption that lead to the potential for imagining anew. Diana Taylor asks in *The Archive and the Repertoire*, “How does one come to inhabit and envision one’s body as coextensive with one’s environment and one’s past, emphasizing the porous nature of skin rather than its boundedness?” (82). It is the absence of understanding created by spontaneity and shock that results in the spectator considering the space between them and the performer. We are breathing and taking up the same amounts of life in the space of breathing and spectating. The immediacy of bodies, the air they both breathe in, that calls attention to their porousness. Both transmit and receive knowledge of a shared experience.

The female performers of this work offer themselves as a means of transgressing the stability of understood systems of knowledge. What is at stake? This question arose unexpectedly throughout this work, each time a spectator reached through the cage, a military member followed a Madre home, a policeman arrested a Mujeres member, or a pin poked through flesh. Performance calls attention to the fragility of the human body. It dissolves the distinction between art and life in that it employs the natural identities of the performers. In making their performing body vulnerable to the spectator, the performer also puts life outside of their art at risk. The female artists of this work undo social pacts by manipulating those that operate upon their natural identities. In possessing a body often subject to forms of societal repression, many of which are associated with the male gaze, these artists regain agency over the way they are perceived. They say, “This is how I know you perceive me, and I will shatter all your perception.”
Just as the Intermediary sits at the center of all knowledge, her veins the canals along which messages travel, her heart’s valves opening and closing to the rhythms of the world. Just like the Intermediary, the artists of this work envision their corpus at the space between the historical and the dramatic, the real and the fantasy, the permanent and ephemeral. Only through the offering of their bodies will the performers expose the invisibles systems of knowledge within which we operate, rupturing them in order to imagine a new society – one of boundless creativity.
"Asociación Madres De La Plaza De Mayo." Web. 15 February 2015.


*Un Chien Andalou*. Dir. Luis Buñuel. 1929. Film.


Driscoll, Faye. Personal Interview. 8 November 2014.


*Maquilapolis*. Creative Capital, 2006. Film.


---. *Te Haré Invencible Con Mi Derrota.* 2010. Video.


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