In Other Los Angeleses

Multicentric Performance Art

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To Nonchi Wang, the other who has coauthored me; with love for my parents, Shu-King Cheng and Yu-Jen Su

[Segment 2]

One birthed Two
Two birthed Three
Three birthed the Multitude.

TAOIST MAXIM REMEMBERED FROM CHILDHOOD MURMURS UNDER THE PILLOW

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Preface

IN OTHER LOS ANGELESES EXPLORES A TRIAD OF INTERACTING PHENOMENA: performance art in L.A. perceived, dismembered, and redreamed by me. Performance art, with its multifarious formal and conceptual permutations, constitutes the flesh and bones of this book. L.A., the history and geography within which the book resides, extends like its skin, offering both sustenance and boundary. I am a conglomerate of sensory and cognitive organs, nerves and spleens, voices and attitudes, which change with the strategic requirement of the moment. I serve the book, as much as the book serves me. I live in the book, even as I enliven it. The constant negotiations and dialogues among this triad of live matter create the rhythms of metabolism and motility for the book.

This preface may be read as a biogram that dissects the triple centers of In Other Los Angeleses. It offers insights and access to the multiple perceptual/conceptual centers into which the book inquires. I start with what seems the most elusive and basic element among the three: the “I” who writes. I then move on to a brief contemplation of multicentricity, the analytical lens through which I study performance art in L.A. Since the concept of multicentricity is largely inspired by the particular geocultural character of L.A., the second section amounts to an emblematic sketch of the book’s title persona—the city caught in its pluralistic epiphany. The next section assesses performance art as an artistic practice that deliriously celebrates its own insufficiency. A live art bound by most biological rules that condition our lives, performance art both discloses and defies its impermanence by opening itself up to spectatorial and interpretive investments. My exposé unravels how, through the recent technologies of preservation, performance art projects and ensures its own prosthetic resurrection by leaving traces for future reassemblage.

Arthur Koestler, a mystic, novelist, scientist, and philosopher who dubbed himself a “trespasser in the age of specialists,” coined the word “holon” in the late 1970s to elucidate the dynamic relationships between what we commonly understand as a part and a whole.[1] Koestler argues that, from the domain of living organisms to that of social organization, nowhere can we find an absolute “whole,” taken as “something complete in itself which needs no further explanation,” or an absolute “part,” regarded as “something fragmentary and incomplete, which by itself would have no legitimate existence.” Instead, we find intermediary structures that may be described as “sub-wholes,” which exhibit some of the characteristics of wholes and some of the characteristics of parts. Koestler proposes the term “holon,” “from the Greek ‘holes’ = whole, with the suffix ‘on’ which, as in proton or neutron, suggests a particle or part” to signify these prevalent sub-wholes. Koestler’s coinage accentuates the two coexisting tendencies in most living entities: “an integrative tendency to function as part of the larger whole, and a self-assertive tendency to preserve its individual autonomy.”

Although we use different terms, I find Koestler’s holon an intriguing precedent for my notion of “center” in a multicentric universe. I posit center as an entity that both assumes its own provisional autonomy and, voluntarily or not, admits to its interdependence on the margins. In short, “center” in my usage is a holon. In proposing what I might call a “holonic” center,
however, my conceptual focus differs from Koestler's. Koestler establishes a theory of “hierarchy” consisting of “autonomous, self-governing holons endowed with varying degrees of flexibility and freedom.” I stress the picture of multiplicity in which diverse holons mark their copresences without delineating their relative or deterministic positions. Despite our differences, it is in the spirit of Koestler's holons that I present multiple centers in this preface, and by extension my book, which is itself a holon.

Edge Writing

I did not realize until way into the book that I am obsessed with the concept of multicentricity probably because, as Gertrude Stein's famous linkage posits, my mind is my geography. And my geography consists of successive residencies in literally marginal locales (on the edge of a given land mass bordering on the ocean). As a Chinese Hakka born on a peripheral island, Taiwan, I was raised in a peripheral city, Taipei, and now live in a peripheral city in a peripheral state, Los Angeles in California. These multiple sites unified in their geographic marginality are the various centers that have sustained, cultivated, tormented, and disciplined my being and becoming. I never feared that I might fall from these peripheries into the unnamable abyss because these places where I made my home—however temporary and disorderly—have always been center enough for my off-center existence. I have myself convinced that, no matter how marginalized and decentered I may be, I am my own center. I look around me and see centers everywhere. I am struck—struck with the awareness that every creature walking, eating, talking, excreting, driving, blooming, flying, or dying around me has the potential, during a quake, to fall into the depth of the earth from her/his/its own center. As mortal beings, we are born equal in our centricity into a multicentric universe.

While my perception of centricity reflects the persuasion of geographies, I suspect it also has much to do with my Chinese heritage. Chung Kao ($$, “China” in Mandarin pronunciation and English transliteration) is commonly translated as the “Middle Kingdom” or the postdynastic “Middle Nation.” The Chinese character Chung ($$), however, can denote “being middle” as well as “being center.” The modest Middle Nation is then also the self-important Central Nation. Such a paradox is implied in the original Chinese character ($$), which can be used in different contexts to indicate “moderation,” “equilibrium,” or “primacy.” I am not using this paradox to justify my own hubris—after all, I theorize about multi centricity rather than uni centricity. Nor do I claim to establish the “essential” Chinese character, although I have noticed the combination of courtesy and arrogance to be a distinct predisposition in most Taiwanese Chinese I know. Perhaps the children of the Central Kingdom pay homage to their ancestors by seeing themselves as holons of centricity. “Chinese are like a plate of scattered sands!” Under a different light, this old saying, which I heard as a child, yields a picture of multicentricity, whose worst imago may indeed be a lump of scattered sands where every grain of sand regards itself as central.

My lexical play on being middle and being central indicates two things: (1) multicentricity is a descriptive and analytical angle but not a prescriptive politics, and (2) multicentricity implies an engagement with the idea of centricity. More pertinent to my present purpose, I wish to note the subliminal influences of cultural upbringing, which exerts its power over the acculturated subject because neither its etiology nor its symptoms are clearly detectable. That which is hidden from consciousness is easily assumed by inheritance. But I believe a cultural
inheritance by default, when anatomized, may be selectively reappropriated as a critical methodology.

If my concept of multicentricity can be partially attributed to my Chinese heritage, then the interdisciplinary methodology that I've developed for my performance studies may bear the same partial ancestry. In retrospect, I notice at least three stylistic peculiarities that might be traceable to my acculturated Sinofication: a hybrid discursive style, an ideographic critique and incongruous cataloging.

In my work on performance art, I've found it necessary to write in a discursive style that melds various genres and voices: description and analysis; poetry and theory; documentation and speculation; biography and extended, even tangential, interpretation; the critique of objects and the self-reflexive probing into the very critique. My hybrid discourse emulates the characteristics of my subject matter, performance art, which tends to draw on multiple disciplines and to mix theory with practice, concepts with percepts and affects. How can a work that strives at times to read the artist's unconscious not chart homeopathically the artist's own imaginary trajectory? The rhetorical question has offered me a rationale to see my hybrid discourse as not only valid but necessary — so long as I also maintain “critical distance” as one of my methodological centers. But this hybrid style happens to agree with a discursive propensity in classical Chinese prose works, which intentionally combine three particular disciplines: literature, history, and philosophy. “Murmurs under the pillow,” the phrase I like to use as an analogy for subliminal cultural influences, may be another reason why I write the way I do.

Throughout the book I frequently apply an isolated image (the frozen posture of an artist or a documentary photograph from a performance installation) as an interpretive anchor to a particular artist's corpus or a given performance project. I read the image as a text and a map: the text, in an elliptical way, hints at a mythology yet to be discovered; the map provides a diagram for the must-see locations in that mythology. This way of reading a picture is of course a well-honed method in art history, from which I learned my craft. But I wonder if it doesn't also reflect my education in an ideographic language, which inculcates in its users the habit of reading a picture as a word remade in calligraphy. A Chinese ideogram is usually composed of numerous independent parts: like semantic holons, each of these parts has particular denotations; combined, they suggest a range of meanings for the ideogram. “Snow” ($$), for example, is composed of two larger holons: the upper part (B) means “the rain” and the lower part ($$) is related to “a sweeper” or the act of “sweeping.” Accordingly, “snow” means, by association, a special kind of rain that can be or needs to be swept away, or a rain too heavy for the sweeper to have any use at all, because it falls on the sweeper and buries it. I may generate even more stories by going into the smaller holons within each larger one. Thus, if my critics object that I have read too much into a given image, they are probably right.

A recurrent syntactic device in the book is the catalog, listing different topics for elaboration. I argue in chapter 1 that the run-on catalog is a linguistic manifestation of multicentricity, which mirrors the horizontality of L.A.'s built environment. Syntactically, each topic in a catalog represents a conceptual center. The various topics that I list together for my inquiry, however, may sometimes have varying significance to the ongoing argument. Why? I explain this phenomenon as a conceptual reflex of the
multicentric condition, which foregrounds the surface plenitude (phenomenologically) without delving into the comparative scales among different centers. Atsome moments I find my multicentric cataloging a potential source of humor, of the kind demonstrated by a passage from Michel Foucault's preface to The Order of Things. Foucault traces the seed of his book to a passage from Jorge Luis Borges, who quotes from “a certain Chinese encyclopedia” that classifies animals into “(a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) et cetera, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies.” Amazed and amused, Foucault comments on this “Chinese” taxonomy as illustrating the Westerners’ “stark impossibility of thinking that.” While Borges, the fiction writer, might actually be the author of that alleged Chinese taxonomy, I do recognize similar inclinations toward the incongruous and the absurd in my own multicentric cataloging. Is it Chinese or is it me?

The One and the Many in Multicentricity

Along with L.A., multicentricity is a protagonist in my first chapter. I shall not overtake myself by forecasting too much what will be debated later. Instead, this section contemplates a covert thesis in multicentricity: the tension between the one and the many. The dialectics between the one and the many is a perennial fixation of mine. I cannot venture a diagnosis at this time, except to say that my book implies a quest for prognoses. In plain language, the one and the many stand for the interplay between a center and multiple other centers. They are the dialectic pair in the concept of multicentricity.

Multicentricity, in my theorization, submits three postulates: (1) the inevitability of perceptual centricity (2) the coexistence of multiple (and multiscaled) centers, and (3) the fundamental inadequacy of any one center. There is no logical sequence among these three postulates, for they both follow and lead to one another. All three imply the interrelations between the one (a single center) and the many (multiple centers). The one may be seen as the individual holon within multiple other holons or as the dynamic and mutable sum total (the One) of the many.

The first postulate comments on the condition of human perception. The perceiver, as the single center in which a set of perspectives originates, is the one enclosed within a world of many. In this instance, the center is the eyes who see, the ears who hear, the mouth who speaks, and the body who experiences, knows, judges, discriminates, expresses, makes mistakes, and (pro)creates. The one is the self who confronts, defies, transgresses against, or rejoices in a world of many significant, hostile, or anonymous others.

The second postulate refers to our terrestrial and cosmic existence. The life on earth consists of a multitude of perceivers, whose visions, strengths, weaknesses, eccentricities, and commonalities expend the energies that keep “life” going. When we look around us, diversity and plenitude are characteristic evolutionary predilections. Life propagates itself until it's unable or undesirable to do so. In this scenario, the one is implied by the many, even as the many are composed of many ones. Whether there is the One that has created these many is beyond my present concern, for I deal not with genesis but with existing phenomena. We know that a multitude of living beings exists. If the original One is unverifiable and varies with different spiritual beliefs, the multitudinous bodies of the present many, however, do constitute an ever-changing corpus of One. Inlife science, many theorists call this mutable
One “Gaia” or “Mother Earth.” In Taoist philosophy, the variable One is named “Tao” (D, or the Way), which is in and of itself a Book of Changes. The same reasoning sequence applies to the structural relations between the earth (the one) and a multitude of other ecosystems (the many) in the cosmos (the One?). In this context, multicentricity is only a shorthand for the zillion-year-old tension between the one and the many.

The third postulate recommends an epistemic attitude to the one who perceives in a world of many. “No man is an island—he is a holon,” adds Koestler to a familiar proverb.[6] I will extend Koestler's effort to include women, children, animals, fish, and plants in the ranks of holons. A holon is a center in a multicentric universe. In the model of perception I posed earlier, a center is a perceiver. Being a holon, the one who perceives cannot possibly claim that she/he/it has the omni-vision to observe and to know all, even though the perceiver cannot but depend on her/his/its holonic vision to see, to learn, and to know. This particular dilemma, I believe, pertains to all mortal, hence fallible, beings. The one relies on interactions with the many in order to understand not only the many but also the selfsame one. We may shift to the analogous paradigm of self and others for further elaboration. The self must interact with others to live and work in a world constituted by a majority of others. The self does so not just for convenience and necessity but also for pleasure and self-knowledge. For me, to recognize such fundamental self-insufficiency is to take a different route toward the philosophy of knowing, epistemology. The awareness of multicentricity urges the perceiver to vacillate between self-affirmation (for the inevitability of perceptual centricity) and self-critique (for the impossibility of absolute knowledge).

Now what of L.A.? Many urban theorists have observed that L.A. is built by a horizontal sprawl of various virtually self-contained cities. Some describe this trait of centrifugal development as polycentered; others, including myself, as multicentered or multicentric. The former choose the prefix “poly” perhaps to criticize the excessiveness of such development; the latter favor the slightly upbeat matter-of-factness of “multi.” Poly or multi, L.A. seems to embody the very tension between the one and the many. “There are many Los Angeleses” goes a local truism. To a frequent driver, the most regional twang in this truism is that, sometimes two hours later, the highway underneath still belongs to the County of Los Angeles: there are many that coalesce as One.

Performance Art: Life, Death, and Transmigration

On May 16, 1998, I was watching a rehearsal in an officelike room inside St. Vincent's, a homeless shelter in downtown L.A. The performers were members of Los Angeles Poverty Department (alias LAPD), a performance ensemble founded by the artist John Malpede in 1985 to continue his work with homeless and formerly homeless people in Skid Row areas. Most of LAPD's performances are collectively created by the ensemble, drawing on its members' autobiographical materials. The rehearsal I attended was led by David Halenda, the assistant director, since Malpede was on sabbatical leave. I could tell that the work-in-progress played on the theme of Dr. Faustus as a migrant everyman, being tempted by Mephistopheles in various urban guises. A chorus of divine beings was added to the scene. Halenda instructed the chorus members to laugh as wildly as they could. Although he didn't specify the reason, I understood the subtext to be the equivalence between mortal folly and divine comedy. Madeline Stroup, a woman probably in her seventies, laughed so heartily and devotedly that she won a round of applause from all of us present in the room.
Six weeks later, on June 26, I attended the performance of LAPD's Paul's Place, the piece developed from the one rehearsal I witnessed. Before the show started, Halenda announced that the performance would be dedicated to Madeline Stroup, who had been with LAPD for several years and who had just passed away a couple of days ago. I read through the program that comprised a list of cast members with a brief statement by each. Next to her name, which was still on the cast list, Stroup wrote, “Here we are again. I hope we're great!” Remembering her rehearsal as a divine chorus member, I wondered if she was playing the role now on a divine stage, laughing at Paul getting lost in his places on the street.

Stroup's unexpected departure gave me a slightly shocking confirmation of an observation Malpede had made during our interview earlier that year. As Malpede explained, most LAPD members lead a transient life, so the company often suffers from the sudden loss of performers—to death, arrest, or other forms of disappearance. Malpede's remark concerned a specific challenge faced by LAPD as an organization that provides a sorely needed forum of communal activities and human contacts for a neglected population. Incidentally, his comment also brings into relief a peculiar attribute of performance art, phrased beautifully by the critic Bonnie Marranca as “the ultimate mysteriousness and heartbreak of a form valued for its ceremony of presence even as it occasions absence.” If I may put it to the extreme: performing is a lissome form of dying.

So what is performance art? A historiographic account might go like this: Performance art has inherited the renegade spirit of the European avant-garde movements from the early twentieth century, extending the experimental energies manifested in such postwar international activities as action painting, Happenings, Fluxus, conceptual art, body art, feminist art, multicultural art, and environmental/earth art. It has hastened the proliferation of postmodern dance and music and spawned a significant theater genre: solo performance. It participates in community-oriented projects that link art with activism and pedagogy. It also leads the investigation into the interfaces between art, the human body, and technology. As a mode of contemporary expression, performance art encompasses a wide range of conceptual, aesthetic, politicized, esoteric, sonic, kinetic, verbal, and single-or multi-media outputs.

This neatly historicized paragraph, however, cannot convey certain recurrent discoveries during my research. The LAPD story epitomizes these discoveries, which I may sum up here: (1) Performance art is a survival art. (2) Like other live arts, performance art embodies an act of simultaneous disclosure and vanishing; yet its conceptual premise invites the spectator to continue certain forms of imaginary investments after the live event. (3) Small but extraordinary deeds are being done by ordinary people in L.A., a place known for its big-budget pursuits of surfaces.

As I argue in this book, performance art is, above all else, an art of necessity. Performance art once had a reputation of being a provocateur's vehicle to engage in taboo subjects and extreme body manipulation and to stir up ethical or political controversies. After three decades' tenure on the contemporary art scene, performance art has shifted from its underground mystique to being an easy label for any live presentation ranging from the avant-garde to the amateurish. Some performance artists, such as Laurie Anderson and Guillermo Gómez-Peña, have attained international critical acclaim, awards, and almost rock-star fame. To most of the artists covered in this book, however, performance art is still an art form with little commercial value. Even
when commercial success is attainable, these artists consider the monetary reward a (desirable) side effect rather than the goal of practicing performance art. Their recognition of performance art's potentials as an art practice suggests how this mixed medium is positioned in the cultural and economic nexus of L.A., a recognition that also reflects the medium's historical grounding.

Historically performance art originated in visual artists' rebellion against the monolithic standard of professional expertise assumed by the art world in the 1970s: a standard commercially defined by the collectibility (i.e., the formalistic polish) of an artwork. The artists' contesting of the implicit mercenary trend succeeded in radically expanding the reified artistic criteria. Such fundamental revision resulted in at least three distinct developments: (1) the equation of mere concepts as art, leading to the “dematerialization” of static artworks in the rise of conceptual art and process art; (2) the incorporation of the artist's body and other time-based elements (e.g., a live audience, a durational project, a presentation based on improvisation and without documentation) as integral components of an artwork, which can be shared temporarily but not possessed; and (3) the insistence on a blurring between art and life, aesthetics and politics, or artist and artifact. These developments have helped complicate the economic standing of performance art as a cultural product in L.A.

Most crucially, performance art's incorporation of transitory elements disrupts the art market's collector ethos and commodity economy. Besides, performance art's broadened function as an aesthetic model with extra-aesthetic efficacy lends itself more readily to existential and social deployments than to capitalist commodification. Both factors are reinforced by performance art's status as a live art, which greatly limits the scale of its public circulation and consumption.

As a live art, performance art shares many characteristics with other time-based arts, such as theater, ballet, and opera. Compared with these more established performing arts, however, performance art offers its practitioner a higher degree of individual autonomy and flexibility. It often places more emphasis on the process of art-making than on the finished art product. To a much greater extent than other types of live art, performance art enlists, recomposes, enacts, and exhibits the artist's life. We may even dub performance art a “live/life art” to distinguish it from other live art forms. A live/life art inspires the practitioner not only to live art as a framed segment of life, but also to live (a sequence of) life heightened by aesthetic intention as art. This strong desire to commingle art and life may be another reason why the performance artist tends to use her/his body—including that body's materiality and histories—as a basis of performance. It also motivates the artist's pursuit for interactive encounters with other bodies in the shared time/space of a theatrical matrix.

My argument provides a clue to the emergence of performance art in the L.A. of the 1980s as a mode closely related to the practitioner's perception, construction, and representation of the self—the nominal center for an individual life. As exemplified by the work of LAPD, performance art offers an accessible means for progressive and/or disenfranchised artists—those I call “other subjects”—to produce committed performances that foster the formation of and interactions among diverse communities. These artists practice performance art because they are compelled to, as if their very existence and sense of well-being depended on it. For them, performance art is not just another art-making method with a variable set of formal
parameters, but a process of probing and displaying the conundrums of survival as a sentient, cognitive, acculturated being.

While performance art is certainly not unique to L.A., its presence in a city dominated by a powerful entertainment industry has a particular local significance. As the avant-garde film critic David James analyzes:

Hollywood affects the city first as an all-pervading, all-colonizing system of spectacular representation, almost entirely inimical to minority and working-class self-consciousness. But it is also an economic system, an industry that holds out the promise of fame for some and employment for many. On both levels—as a textual system and as a means of cultural production—it affects everything in the city, including other forms of culture. Even if these are initially maverick or adversarial to it, they can only exist in dialogue with it; and even if their intention is to displace it, in however small a way, they often benefit from its resources.

James's incisive critique articulates the complex, and often complicitous, relationships between Hollywood's near-monopoly and other agents of cultural expressions. Within this nexus, performance art functions primarily as an alternative source of aesthetic production, one that permits the emergence of an/other cultural ecology to resist, bypass, or abate the Hollywood hegemony. In its active cultivation of multicentric habitats for other visions and voices, performance art provides a space of survival for experimental live art. Moreover, its embodied context serves up an antidote to the prevalent postmodern experiences of alienation, segregation, and mediation. Take, for example, someone like Madeline Stroup. For her, “Hollywood” might simply mean the billboards of stars underneath whose shadows she sometimes paused to avoid the sun. But performance art afforded her a sense of emplacement, if not a permanent home, for her last days in L.A.

That performance art was able to render a small miracle in Stroup's life suggests how the process of making a performance may actively serve the performance maker. In this sense, performance art revolves around a paradox: it

serves the artist/self precisely by emplacing the artist within an environment filled with others—be they other artists in a performance ensemble or the spectatorial others in a live performance situation. The mechanism of self-other interdependence, in my opinion, has contributed to the propensity for a performance art piece to seem unfinished, a formal trait exacerbated by the artist's general reluctance to impose authorial meanings on a given work. Thus, a work that centers around the self is intentionally left to be completed by others. The artist/self relinquishes certain control over the performative action in exchange for incarnated engagements with the viewer/other. While such an exchange may be an incentive for all live art practitioners, the performance artist tends to solicit the spectatorial other's investment to the extent that the other is given conceptual co-ownership of the performance. I stress, however, that the solicitation for an immediate other's engagement derives from privileging the interactive circumstances of live art; as such, it is by no means particular to performance art. What differentiates performance art from other types of live art on this score lies in degree, not in kind.

An artwork that centers around the self is left to be completed by others. The statement foregrounds metaphorically the circuit of embodied exchanges between the artist and the viewers in a live performance context. The artist presents a rehearsed or improvised action in
front of and for the sake of an audience; the audience returns the imaginary gift in kind by contributing its own covert performances — to use “performance” here in its larger implication as an intentional enactment. This scenario is likely to occur in every publicized live action, whose impacts may indeed be gauged by the circulation of explicit and implicit performances from the stage to the auditorium and back. I imagine that the relations between the explicit performance and its implicit others resemble those between a progenitor and its progeny. Like an inverse birth, a hermeneutic space is virtually carved out within the performance proper, so as to incorporate— to put into its corpus — the spectatorial other’s tacit and reactive performances. These covert performances include the spectator’s silent attention, tangential comments, fond recollections, and sustained critiques, during or after the live event. They are born out of the interpretive exchange occasioned by the performance; they hold the prospects of extending the reach of the originary performance. This analogy explains why a performance artist would desire to share the imaginary ownership of a given piece with a spectatorial other. Only when there is a fluid circulation of imaginary currencies can the act of communicative transaction between the artist/actant and the spectator/reactant be marked. And only through such communicative transaction can a performance find an opportunity to be remembered.

To be remembered, a performance has to live at least twice. For the first time, a performance lives an ephemeral life in actuality, its mortality consumed by the performing artists and their spectators for a designated duration. A performance cannot but complete itself by disappearing from sight/site. It fulfills the promise of its being only when it parades its own dying and signals the moment of death. Two options are open for a performance to deal with the dilemma of being time-bound. It can choose to perish with time or to defy the perishing time. For the latter option, a performance commonly resorts to a tactic of dismemberment. It ensures its possible resurrection by leaving multimedia traces: texts, videotapes, recordings, performance scores, photographs, web sites, referential documentation, peripheral testimonies, transcribed or embellished eyewitness accounts— each source acting as an imaginary center for subsequent re/creation. From then on, a performance has the potential to live again, posthumously, in virtuality. It lives an afterlife in the mind/body/imagination of whoever reassembles and reconstitutes its dispersed flesh to create a prosthetic performance, a surrogate that replaces and extends its lost origin. Although a prosthetic performance cannot fully restore or supplant the originary performance, it carries the memory and multiplies the affectability of the source performance, much as an offspring does for a beloved but absent parent. Admittedly, from the perspective of the source performance, between here and here-again something is invariably lost. Yet, I argue, something else is gained—a review, an adaptation, an artist’s memoir, a scholarly book, another live performance piece, all inspired by a single source. The Theater and Its Double, as Antonin Artaud entitles his seminal book: the prosthetic performance is the double of performance art.

Let’s recall my earlier contemplation of the interplay between the one and the many, which underscores multicentricity. If an originary performance is analogous to the one, then a prosthetic performance may be likened to a single realization in a pool of many re/creative possibilities. The same thesis applies to the relations between the artist, who is the authorial one, and the spectatorial recreator, who is potentially one among many. The politics of performance art therefore pivots on the dynamics of power, need, fantasy, confrontation, and symbiosis at work between its modal pair: two sentient subjects, each existing for the other—the artist/self and the witnessing/interpreting other. In this light, I suggest that performance art
actually supplies a constitutive instance of multicentricity, because the artist's authorship or centricity has become conceptually dispersed and shared among many. It is worth noting, however, that the act of making available such multicentric shareholdership is not utterly altruistic. By surrendering its centricity, or self-sufficiency, performance art engenders its own return as a phantasmic collage for posterior cultural circulation. This magnanimous self-surrender allows and entices a spectatorial other to become a recreator, who dreams up a memory spectacle, a prosthetic performance, from the salvaged remnants of the originary performance.

Other Than Elsewhere

As its subtitle Multicentric Performance Art signals, In Other Los Angeleses collects an array of prosthetic performances that commemorate my actual and/or virtual encounters with some inimitable obelisks of flesh, the limpid but self-evaporating performances. The book hypothesizes that these multicentric performances are miniature icons and signifiers of other Los Angeleses, so far little known to their outsiders. My research excavates the performance terrains of these other Los Angeleses to uncover their fossilized remembrances of things past, in an attempt to illuminate their present morphologies and to anticipate their future mutations. I take a labyrinthine path in my excavation, not to bewilder my fellow explorers or prospective recreators, but to trace the convoluted and at times overlapped vectors radiating from the site's multiple centers. The ensuing chapters chart the eccentric configurations of these multiple centers, which have made L.A.'s performance history a vibrant series of cultural ecologies.

Chapters 1 and 2 serve the twofold function of introduction and substantiated critique. Chapter 1 employs multicentricity as a new conceptual angle from which to analyze performance art's three functions (reflective, redressive, and generative) in its dynamic interactions with other cultures in L.A. Geography, history, economics, and demographic and cultural transformations of L.A. feature as prominently as do the diverse performance genres that the city has helped engender in the past four decades. Artists sampled in this chapter include Allan Kaprow, Judy Chicago, Barbara Smith, Rachel Rosenthal, Eleanor Antin, and Chris Burden.

Chapter 2 presents an insurgent performance of myself, the-I-who-writes, as an other subject reading, writing, and living in L.A. My performative inquiry unravels the city's successive self-imaging occasions, from the three Los Angeles Festivals (1987, 1990, 1993) to two major performance art-related museum exhibitions in 1998: “Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object, 1949–1979” at the Geffen Contemporary and “Love Forever: Yayoi Kusama, 1958–1968” at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. As a counter-narrative to the city's self-portraiture, the chapter pinpoints the motif of a feminist and multicultural continuum, which runs through most chapters. This thesis, however, will be contravened by the closing chapter, which stands as an antithesis, a thematic other, to the rest of the book. I consider this deliberate dialectic strategy a demonstration of multicentricity, which necessitates self-critique in a macrocosm of coexisting others.

Chapters 3, 4, and 6 each center on an artist or an ensemble. Chapter 3 singles out Suzanne Lacy as an artist who has embodied the feminist and multicultural continuum in her
performance art. Lacy has contributed two decades of excellent artistic and critical work to L.A.'s performance history. Through an inquiry into her exemplary career, the chapter also tackles two innovative concepts of performance art: the politics of marginality and the affective anatomy of performance art via multiple audienceships.

Chapter 4 adopts the Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz's theory of “transculturation” to explore the performance career of Elia Arce, an immigrant artist originally from Costa Rica. Transculturation suggests a way of analyzing Arce's transformation from an ensemble player to a solo artist creating her own autobiographically based self performances with pronounced feminist inflections. Arce's singular intersections with L.A.'s multicentric cultural terrains attest to performance art's vitality as a means of self-empowerment, creative expression, and cultural production.

Shifting the focus from single artists' works to ensemble performances, Chapter 6 examines the conceptual power of naming evinced in the performance works collectively created by Sacred Naked Nature Girls/SNNG, a triracial, multiethnic, and transgendered group of four women artists (Danielle Brazell, Laura Meyers, Akilah Oliver, and Denise Uyehara). The chapter offers an in-depth reading of SNNG's *Untitled Flesh*, an all-nude performance that mines multiple ramifications of female sexualities.

At the core and the close of the book are two chapters that investigate two genres: self performance and art performance. Self performance, my term for autobiographically based solo performance, is a genre long associated with Highways, especially in the five-year period (1989–1993) when L.A. was swept by the grand experiment of multiculturalism. Chapter 5 proposes the concept of hetero-locus to analyze Highways' contributions to L.A. as a geocultural center that values, molds, and exhibits heterogeneous otherness in producing multicentric self performances. The artists whose works illustrate a diverse range of the genre in this chapter include Guillermo Gómez-Peña, Tim Miller, Luis Alfaro, Joan Hotchkis, Danielle Brazell, Dan Kwong, Denise Uyehara, and Shishir Kurup.

Chapter 7 analyzes the ontology of theatricality by grappling with a performance art genre that most approximates theater art. Art performance, antithetical to other performance genres with existential efficacy or redressive intent, holds the intrinsic components of the performance medium—the timespace-action-performer-audience matrix of theatricality—as its primary sources of expressions. The performance groups covered in the chapter include Johanna Went; Toti M. O'Brien, John O'Brien, and Steve Roden; Oguri and Renzoku; and osseus labyrint, a constellation of artists directed by Hannah Sim and Mark Steger. My study scans five prevalent tendencies common to these groups (including nontext basis, body technology, improvisation-genesis, homi-xenology, and audience consumption) in order to elucidate their manifold solutions to the problems of theatricality.

Here I reach the end of a beginning, the elsewhere of an end. For whom do I write? Bodies elsewhere; voices heard and gone; faces crumpling in mnemonic ethers, turned transparent; gentle, anxious, or hastened steps lingering in sightless air, scaring bats. When prose ages and retires from labor, poetry emerges as its prosthesis. When a performance is shared and spent, memory is set in motion. Do I mourn for the new that can only grow older by remembering the already old? Or do I breathe together with the new-old so as to reanimate the old-new?
Thoughts abound, visions plentiful, but inscribing them demands the rationing of small patience and daily stillness in a city propelled by transportable loneliness. Memory lies on the other shore of loneliness, where phantom others whisper so tirelessly to keep my piece of stillness spinning: on I ride, my vertigo insatiable.

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About a quarter of In Other Los Angeleses was formed in an earlier project, somewhat awkwardly entitled Otherness Naturalized: Multicultural Performance Art in Los Angeles. I am indebted to the Southern California Studies Center (SC2) at USC, which granted me a Junior Faculty Research Award (1996–97) to pursue the project. The monograph answered SC2's call to turn USC into an international center of research known as the L.A. School, focusing on the city's specific urban environment as a laboratory to examine the political, economic, sociological, ecological, educational, and cultural issues confronting the contemporary United States. I thank SC2 Director Michael Dear for his support and for introducing me to my editor Stan Holwitz at the University of California Press. I also acknowledge another grant from USC, from the Zumberge Research and Innovation Fund (1999), which enabled me to work on my book with summer stipends.

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1. Inscribing Multicentricity

Performing Other Los Angelese

Edge Gazing/Center Flash

In the late 1960s the Los Angeles painter Sam Francis produced a series of mural-size works uniformly named *Untitled (Edge Painting), [year of production]*.[1] These paintings suggest a way of observing contemporary Los Angeles cultures from the multiple perceptual centers of the edge. They also prefigure the profusion of luminous performances that first happened in the margins and remained “on edge.”[2]
In a typical *Edge Painting* configuration the canvas is largely painted white, with stripes of vivid colors—red, blue, yellow, green, black—delineating the edge. A palpable tension exists between the central territory of white and its colorful peripheries. Although the white and the colors are structurally segregated, there is no absolute barrier between them. In *Untitled (Edge Painting), 1966* (fig. 1), for example, some white color crosses over to the blue and drops into the yellow-red-blue; two blue scratches and a gray dot float somewhere in the white middle, while the bottom band of red rages into the white like waves of fire. The drama of territorial negotiations continues within the colored sphere: the yellow is covered by blue, turned green, and submerged by red, or perhaps it is the green that was there in the first place, and has subsequently been covered by yellow, blue, and red. At this point there is no telling

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1 Sam Francis, *Untitled (Edge Painting), 1966*, acrylic on canvas, 199 × 100 cm. © The Sam Francis Estate/The Litho Shop, Inc. Permission granted by Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

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which color actually came first, nor is it crucial, I think, for us to verify the color chronology in order to appreciate the painting’s effect. We do not even know whether the color white was the original coating for the entire canvas, even though it appears at first that the color white is both encroached upon and enlivened by other colors. The being of whiteness seems to be established by its colorful frame. A closer reading, however, yields much ambiguity. The edge of colors exposes the center of white as both solid and empty, at once a homogeneous majority and a yet-to-be-discovered mystery. The main area is filled with one particular color, yet it also looks like a colorless background that wants to be painted. The painting seems both pregnant and unfinished; it signals the promise or the inertia of a frozen moment.

As it plays on the margins, *Edge Painting* paradoxically foregrounds the enigma of the center. In *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Culture*, Russell Ferguson raises the
question: “When we say marginal, we must always ask, marginal to what? But this question is difficult to answer. The place from which power is exercised is often a hidden place. When we try to pin it down, the center always seems to be somewhere else.” Ferguson's comment addresses the ambiguity of an “invisible center,” which exerts undeniable power over the ways we live, eat, think, work, exercise, play, and relate to others, but cannot be fully described. The center's power always exceeds our definitions for it. Edge Painting flips Ferguson's question: “When we say center, we must also ask, center to what?”

This question seems easier to answer: center to what is marginal. Center, then, is what is not marginal. Center is a locus circumscribed by what it is not, a region framed by its peripheries. It is a norm delimited by its deviations, its others. But the “center” or “norm” cannot be fixed, because it resides in silence. It may mutate over time and in response to strategic necessities. It may consume itself and need to be renewed. It may even overlap with the margins. The composition of Edge Painting implies that it is easier to recognize the margins by their specific colors than to name the void that occupies the center. The void claims an undeniable power because of its impenetrable homogeneous mass. That semblance of homogeneity is nevertheless captured in suspense: it has the potential to change. At times center may signify the status quo, which resists change and pursues hegemony; it possesses the power to co-opt and assimilate its margins. At other times it is caught in a process of modification, decomposition, compromise, and reinvention, often as a result of the pressures from the margins. As Edge Painting provocatively proposes, center is a blank that needs to be filled. It can be filled with a multiplicity of contents. Therein lies the possibility of subversion and contamination from the margins.

Edge Painting offers us a structural model to study the complex and dy—namic relations between the center and the margins. Just as the central blank needs the fringes to delimit its nebulous sphere, the fringe elements also define their places either in opposition to or by their correlation with the center. By featuring such visible interdependence, Edge Painting presents a model of centricity diametrically opposed to the classical one. As André Maurois has outlined, the idea of centricity appeared in the third-century text Corpus Hermeticum. The twelfth-century French theologian Alain de Lille developed the idea as an attribute of divinity: “God is an intelligent sphere whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere.” Giordano Bruno in 1584 revised de Lille's metaphysical hermeneutics to fit his astronomical observation: “We can assert with certainty that the universe is all center, or that the center of the universe is everywhere and its circumference nowhere.” Blaise Pascal in the seventeenth century further reduced Bruno's cosmic measure to a terrestrial scale: “Nature is an infinite sphere whose center is everywhere, whose circumference is nowhere.” A signifier for the mystery of infinity, the “center” posed in these texts assumes simultaneously an infinitesimal scale (“center is everywhere”) and an infinite scale (its “circumference is nowhere”). In contrast, both the center and the circumference in Edge Painting are expressly present and measurable. Insofar as the circumference for the center is marked as a tangible boundary, centricity is no longer an equivalent term for infinity/divinity; it becomes instead a property intrinsic to sentient, mortal beings. The artwork thus illustrates a paradigm of centricity for the finite being.

Let me return to Ferguson's comment about the power exercised by the hidden center. He describes the center and the margin as two constitutive entities in understanding contemporary culture. As Edge Painting evinces, these constitutive entities are fundamentally structural (relational) rather than determinedly figural (with fixed patterns). Further, this structure is
both finite and unstable. The painting exposes the structural positioning between center and margin as fluid, porous, and subject to contingencies and temporal adjustments. Not only will the respective contents for each be altered over time, but the apparent polarity between center and margins captured in *Edge Painting* may not always hold. Thus, when we say center is *what is not marginal*, we may also say margin is *what is not yet center*. As the scale decreases in our analysis, more flexibility is available in the structural positioning between center and margin. The polarity between center and margin might become less rigid, while the mystery of center might be relatively easier to decipher. This is the paradox presented by *Edge Painting* as a paradigm of centricity: the painting needs its mural-size scale to convey the central blank's awesome appeal.

The simultaneous complexity and blankness of *being center* manifested in *Edge Painting* point to other characteristics: center is seldom self-sufficient, center is usually situational, center is potentially receptive, and center is always provisional.

Center is seldom self-sufficient because it can hardly be conceived, let alone defined, without resorting to its negative. On a secular and suprapersonal scale, this paradigm of centricity divulges the dynamics of codependency between the dominant class and its others. On a personal scale, this paradigm becomes a model of *subjectivity* that defines the individual subject by *intersubjective relations*. I may see myself, for example, as an individual center. But I cannot define who I am without differentiating myself from others: I am not-you, not-he, not-she, not-we, not-they. Nor can I differentiate myself from others without simultaneously positioning myself in relation to others: I am at various moments with you, with him, with her, becoming part of us, joining them. Being center is then a perception that compels me to recognize the coexistence of those who frame my margins. I must therefore admit my own lack of self-sufficiency and my interrelatedness with others. I may be excessively self-centered, even egocentric, but my constant reliance on others to know myself better exposes my solipsistic egocentrism as faulty and inadequate, even self-destructive. By making the circumference explicit, *Edge Painting* undercuts the implicit power assumed by my centricity/subjectivity and insists that I also keep the limit of my centricity in view.

To recognize that center is hardly transcendent is to regard being center as situational. I see myself as a center; therefore I realize that you also have your own center, and he his, she hers, we ours, and they theirs. When gauged from different time-space coordinates, the multiple others who frame my center are themselves their own centers. Just as I see my others as marginal to me, my others see me as marginal to them. Every individual subject is her/his own center. Sometimes, by choice, coercion, or force, the subject may identify with deviance or marginality rather than centricity. In that case, I maintain that the subject's supposed deviance/marginality actually occupies the space of her/his center. As every subject projects her/his own *norm*, every norm may be an exception, while every exception is potentially a norm, depending on where we view it. Thus, on an individual scale, there are centers and circumferences everywhere. Centricity is an effect established by context and changes with perspectives and situations.

The argument that being center is often a subjective perception variable with situations leads to the axiom that center is a potentially receptive structure. As *Edge Painting* epitomizes, center is a largely blank structure with distinct edges. From a semiotic perspective, I may read the structure as a schema for the human's cognitive system. The white area signifies the
epistemic status quo, formed by a particular conglomerate of genetic, neurological, social, cultural, and political determinants. The colorful fringes are then the emergent stimuli that destabilize the status quo, forcing it to alter its shape and content for better accommodation and utilization of the new. It is just as likely, however, that the epistemic status quo may suffer from inertia, entropy, exhaustion, malnutrition, or pathology, thereby losing the ability to adapt. The center as a blank structure therefore has the potential to absorb stimuli and to strive for rejuvenation. Nevertheless, it is not inherently receptive and may resist change.

If center is a potentially receptive structure, then it is also a provisional process. The blankness that occupies the center of *Edge Painting* is both foreboding and inviting. It is so not only because it eludes comprehension and definition, but also because it is filled with possibilities. To introduce any specific content into this blank means the reduction of its full potential in sacrificing all but a few of its possibilities. Still, the challenge posed by its blankness is its very appeal. The painting looks tantalizingly unfinished. Its central area seems to have emptied itself out for visitations. Perhaps it simply withholds its resistance to alterity. Its static white surface appears open to other colors. Maybe it poises to appropriate their otherness so as to disrupt its present stagnancy. It yearns to become once again a live painting—an artwork still in the making. The blankness left in the painting's center therefore poses itself as a process rather than a permanent condition. Being a voided center, it inhabits a state of becoming.

A live (nonstagnant) center is caught in constant motion; it is a vessel that changes with its particular contents. In order to maintain/reclaim its centricity, a center—whatever it signifies—may undergo a cyclical process of absorption and reinforcement, whereby it becomes customized by its contents. A center sustains its centricity not by holding on to its customized state, but by regarding all its present contents as temporary, provisional, and radically alterable. For a center's ability to survive depends on its sensitivity to contingencies and its willingness to adjust for vicissitudes. In this light, center becomes simultaneously a susceptible vessel and a vital vehicle, strengthening its established contents while absorbing other stimuli for continuous self-renewal. *Edge Painting* drives this idea home through a paradox: it reveals centricity as a mutable process by showing a blank structure with distinct margins but a dissolved center. In short, this model of centricity is simultaneously decentered[6]—the center is there and nowhere.

**Multiple Los Angelieses**

**Re-scanning Edge Painting**

I discover in Sam Francis's *Edge Painting* a path to Los Angeles, the site for the contemporary performances that my book studies. The painting's model of centricity helps me foreground this particular location, which also produced *edge Painting*.

The Los Angeles where the painting was “born” is of course another Los Angeles, which exists only in the elsewhere of memories. Francis first exhibited his *Edge Painting* series in Paris. The fact invites us to speculate about the painting's allegorical dimension. The central white area might signify the dominant forces in the painter's hometown that rendered his
artistic expressions marginal. Francis might be critiquing the hegemonic center of power rather than contemplating a general theory about decentered centricity. Whatever the artist's intent, our question is: Can *Untitled (Edge Painting), 1966* retain its efficacy as a structural paradigm for the turn-of-millennium Los Angeles? Can it account for the multicultural ecology, the complex relations among diverse ethnic groups, and the urban geography in this expansive postmodern metropolis?

To me, the artwork's own ambiguity allows it to be read in various ways as portraying this malleable city. On a literal and diagrammatic level, we could read *Edge Painting* as a political parable. It presents a quantified mapping of ethnic competitions, where a white majority asserts its dominance over people of color, while the color contingencies agitate from the margins. Conflicts exist between the white and other colors, but there is also antagonism among different nonwhite colors. In this vein, the painting offers a haiku impression of Los Angeles during the 1992 South Central civil unrest. We could also read *Edge Painting* as a general scheme about territorial struggles and negotiations, hinting at the dilemmas of immigration confronting present-day Los Angeles.

On a metaphorical—non-color-specific—level, we could cast *Edge Painting* in cultural terms. The white area represents the amorphous mainstream culture, while the peripheries contain the heterogeneous other cultures: alternative cultures, subcultures, ethnic minority cultures, feminist cultures, queer cultures, diasporic cultures, and the self-proclaimed avant-garde culture that desires to inhabit the cutting edge. As the contrast between the white mass and the narrow spans of other colors implies, it is easier to label these marginal cultures as “other” than to pin down the “mainstream.” Is the mainstream culture synonymous with the traditional, Eurocentric high culture, the peoplegenerated popular culture, or the money-driven, ideologically muffled mass culture? In the specific Los Angeles context, is mainstream culture identical to the Hollywood Cultural Industry, to the Disney Fantasy Factory, and to the values, standards, and signifying systems instituted by the city's Cultural Establishment?

The answer to this last question seems readily affirmative. All three parties combined represent the critical mass for the Los Angeles cultural mainstream.

Nevertheless, except for Disney as “the happiest place on Earth,” none of the other hegemonic entities can be fully described without discrepancy. The structural nonequivalence illustrated by *Edge Painting* suggests that it is easier to perceive deviation from the mainstream norm than to define the norm. Yet, just because the “norm” is hard to pin down does not mean that it does not exist. The solidity of the elusive norm can be daunting, as attested by the wrath of the righteous experienced by its deviants. It is nonetheless a myth to assume that the norm is always homogeneous or unified. Multiplicity and contradictions exist both in the blank center and the colored margins. Actually, in cultural terms, the polarity between the mainstream center and its divergent margins captured by *Edge Painting* is rapidly becoming extinct or irrelevant. The multivalent admixture of diverse cultures in my Los Angeles threatens to saturate Sam Francis's large canvas with a dripping hybridity of paints.

**City of Fables**

I am fascinated by the ability of *Edge Painting* to inspire speculations by posing a tantalizing emptiness front center. It is reticent yet very *there*. This quality of being vacuous yet suggestive, present yet volatile embodied by the painting inadvertently articulates why Los
Angeles is a magnet not only for migrants and settlers from other states and countries, but also for imaginary and discursive investments. “Back in Los Angeles, we missed Los Angeles,” writes Randall Jarrell. Los Angeles is a void and an ideal, an impossible vacuum and a violation, a kaleidoscopic vision, a fractal formation, or, in Lars Nittve's phrase, “aprojection on the windshield.” Poets, novelists, artists, playwrights, screenwriters, cartoonists, television sit-com teams, lyricists, journalists, architects, world travelers, ethnographers, seismologists, late-capitalist economists, postmodern urban theorists, postcolonial cultural critics, media scholars, and performance historians all formulate and promulgate their versions of Los Angeles. The wide range of their interpretations can result only from amultiplication of the interpreters' specular, verbal, temperamental, and circumstantial disparity with the city's own diversity. Thus, ironically, extreme opinions abound. Jack Kerouac, the chronicler of the Beat Generation, wrote: “ ‘LA.’ I love the way she said ‘LA’; I love the way everybody says ‘LA’ on the Coast; it's their one and only golden town when all is said and done.” And Bertolt Brecht, a European exile briefly flirting with Hollywood during World War II, found “on thinking about Hell, that it must be / Still more like Los Angeles.”

Other cities certainly have their shares of local narratives, but Los Angeles was actively built on boosterism, on the promises made by speculative words and images. According to Gary A. Dymski and John M. Veitch, “Although other cities grew incrementally through decades, Los Angeles emerged through riotous bouts of speculative excess.” Such “boom/bust” development corresponds to the city's continuous fashioning of palatable regional images: Los Angeles is malleable and equivocal precisely because it is a city of information, which includes its manufactured dreams. A specific feature here is the conjunction of interpretive wills and the will to interpret: residents not only create the city according to their own interpretations, but feel compelled to make such interpretations. The persona of the city is embedded in high-flying fancies as much as in clichés, both replicating a set of general opinions frequently cited by many. Even a tourist to the city might feel smug enough to comment on its multiplicity, eclecticism, heterogeneity, ethnic divisiveness, and dispersed urban sprawl. Los Angeles invites the proliferation of discourses about itself, in a degree comparable only to other self-conscious metropolises in the world, such as New York City, Chicago, Paris, Vienna, Venice, Berlin, London, Taipei, Tokyo, and Mexico City. The peculiar magnetism of Los Angeles lies not in its uniqueness but in its paradigmatic role as a late-capitalist geocultural urban prototype. On top of such typicality, Los Angeles happens to own the world's biggest machine for commodified information/fantasy.

The center is there and nowhere. As a city of information—which is often nonhierarchical, even unverifiable—the being of Los Angeles is largely constructed upon the interpreters' own ideological investments. It becomes what the interpreter wants it to be. What's the end result that we enjoy today? That which can be grasped readily does not seem to untangle fully the vast and inscrutable lining of this city. The mystery of Los Angeles is, as Jean Baudrillard ventures, “precisely that of no longer being anything but a network of incessant, unreal circulation.” The center of Los Angeles seems to have dissolved in the murmurs of information, or rather, more exactly, it has proliferated into multiple centers.

Heteroglossia in Heteropolis
The centers follow the split tongues: the Bakhtinian “heteroglossia” at once produced by and reproducing Los Angeles confirms one of the truisms surrounding this megalopolis—there are many Los Angeleses. Baudrillard's theory of simulation holds that it is no longer possible to ascertain the cause-and-effect sequence between the city's images and materiality, between its hyperreal virtuality and lived actuality. I find the claim pertinent only to an extent, for the many Los Angeleses certainly also exist outside of the stunning array of information and cultural phenomena epitomized by such European conceits as Baudrillard's “precession of simulacra” and Bakhtin's “heteroglossia.” Consider the remarks of another European cultural observer who latches on the city's postmodern factility. Charles Jencks describes Los Angeles as a primary example of “heteropolis, a new form of urban agglomeration that thrives on difference.” A heteropolis is, according to Jencks, “a global city of more than eight million with a high concentration of multinational corporations and having a variety of economic sectors, multiplying lifestyles, and a diversifying ethnic population heading toward full minoritization. Most important, it is a place where heterogeneity—of culture and even of flora and fauna—are enjoyed.”

I appreciate Jencks's enthusiasm, although I doubt that heterogeneity is always “enjoyed” by Angeleno/as. In any case, Jencks hits the mark in indicating heterogeneity as a physical and a historical condition of contemporary Los Angeles. The city's expansive urban geography and diverse ethnic populations encourage the dispersion and re-formation of polycentered, multiform, ethnically and linguistically mixed enclaves. A city of cities, turn-of-millennium Los Angeles has developed into a cultural, economic, political, and demographic conglomerate of multiple centers. Heterogeneity is seen, heard, tasted, worn, carried, encountered, transacted, dwelled, and shuttled. Yet neither the city's territorial expansiveness nor its supposed tolerance for heterogeneity is preordained.

In 1781 Los Angeles consisted of a scattered collection of towns centered around the settlement of El Pueblo de Nuestra Señora la Reina de los Angeles de Porciúncula. In 1871 this violent “Hell Town” made headlines around the world for the racist massacre of about twenty Chinese workers out of a total Chinese population of two hundred. With the surge of primarily WASP migrants from small-town mid-America, separate municipalities such as Pasadena, Santa Monica, and Pomona were founded around the end of the nineteenth century, prefiguring, in Allen J. Scott and Edward W. Soja's terms, “the sprawling, polycentric character of [the region’s] urban built environment.” This unidimensional, centrifugal, and multicentric character was reinforced by the construction of freeways, which enabled a period of “mass suburbanization” and, subsequently, with the growth of outer cities, a period of “mass regional urbanization.” The five-county region of greater Los Angeles now expands outward for sixty miles in every direction, encompassing more than 160 separate municipalities and a current population of fifteen million. Los Angeles has surpassed New York as the most ethnically diverse of all North American cities.

With the surges of multiethnic and multinational populations throughout the region's history came various purges of differences. Anti-Asian sentiment “rationalized” the confinement of more than thirty thousand Japanese Americans from Los Angeles in concentration camps in 1942. Hostility toward Mexicans worsened after the so-called Zoot Suit riots of 1943. The fear
of a Socialist/Communist takeover of the movie industry “justified” the harassment of European intellectuals, who had fled Nazism and fascism only to find themselves in the grips of the House Un-American Activities Committee in the early 1950s. Racism against African Americans, expressed through restrictive housing covenants in the 1930s, and then through financial redlining that persisted to the 1990s, reinforced housing segregation and allowed the deterioration of living conditions in the inner-city ghettos. Anti-homeless prejudice in the 1980s instigated the installation in Skid Row Park of an elaborate sprinkler system, which drenched unsuspecting sleepers at random hours during the night. Xenophobia and environmental paranoia, aggravated by the passage of California’s Proposition 187 in 1994, cloud the ongoing debates over (il/legal) immigration policies. These unflattering records serve to dissipate any doubt why Los Angeles has been the site for two violent urban uprisings: in Watts (1965) and in South Central (1992).

Despite the undercurrents of racial discrimination, economic inequality, and intolerance of human differences, Los Angeles has enjoyed a century of almost continuous boom, slowed periodically only by national and global economic recession. This factor—augmented by the balmy Southern California weather; the myths of L.A.-style freedom, comfort, and glamour; and its geographic proximity to Asia, the Pacific islands, and Latin America—ensures that the city’s heterogeneity will never be in short supply. Even after the Northridge earthquake, L.A. has continued to be the mecca for “enormous population movements both from other parts of the United States and from other parts of the world.” Demographic reports positively support the trend of “minoritization” identified by Jencks: L.A. County’s “population shifted from 70 percent Anglo to 60 percent non-Anglo between 1970 and 1990, as what was once the most white and Protestant of American cities changed into what some commentators now call America’s leading Third World city.”

The ethnic map summarized by Jencks boasts a mosaic of Mexicans, Koreans, Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese, Filipinos, Salvadorans, Indians, Iranians, Russians, and many more—“with Latinos, Jews, and WASPs the largest minorities in this minoritized place.” The effect of such thorough minoritization, Jencks adds, is to divide Los Angeles into village-size fragments, like a set of countries forming “the crazy-quilt pattern of a simmering Europe before World War I.”

Heterogeneity may give off the pleasures of abundance and inclusiveness (which Jencks celebrates), but it may also become depoliticized into a mass of interchangeable differences. L.A. is a metropolis “in love with its limitless horizontality,” maintains Baudrillard. As one may see in a glance behind the wheel, this extended megacity wears its own micro-diversity on surface streets like variety tattoos. I discover that such nonhierarchical and uniformly dispersed heterogeneity has produced another effect of minoritization: the superficial leveling and accumulation of all differences, which are further neutralized by the postmodern mediascape, afloat in a psychic prairie of horizontality. The best translation of this horizontality into a rhetorical device is the run-on catalog.

Consider this quick inventory of the many Los Angeleses experienced from various vantage points: the aerial view preferred by the European travelers like Baudrillard, who marvels at the city’s “inferno effect” seen from above; the automobile view that inspired the logo of traffic signs for a 1998 exhibition entitled “Sunshine and Noir: Art in L.A. 1960–1997” at UCLA’s Armand Hammer Museum; the sub/urban pedestrians’ views that differ drastically among economically segregated neighborhoods; the surveillance camera’s view rebuked by Mike Davis in his prescient *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles*; the ocean surfer’s view that assembles a solartopia from crests of waves, bikinis, in-line skaters, and
Venice Beach performance artists; the gay bartender's view that absorbs staccato loneliness in the House of Blues; the Mickey Mouse impersonator's view that sweats over a fantasy job in some Imagineers' utopia; the homeless teenager's view that scavenges behind a donut shop; the Compton gangsta rapper's view that practices “apolitics of location” via nasty rhymes for cash cows; the traffic jam victim's view that exudes impatience seasoned by a mild worry about the “Big One”; the Korean merchants' views that witnessed their grocery shops burned to the ground on Sa-I-Gu (April 29, 1992); the running celluloid views that dismember, multiply, beautify, cannibalize, and embalm this hyperreal heteropolis on the silver screen.[23]

A sea of numbing differences translate perceptually into a desert of insignificances. The flow of “global non-meaning” flushes through Los Angeles like automated and evanescent billboard commercials.[24]

Other Los Angeleses

It should be clear by now that I believe neither centricity nor multicentricity guarantees a ticket to paradise—or to purgatory. As I pour the multicentric bodies of Los Angeleses into the mold of centricity held up by Edge Painting, the middle void becomes a collage of fragments, with independent, parallel, or intersecting centers, bubbling in varying sizes and colors, filling the canvas all the way to the edges. Does that mean that I have found a group portrait for the many Los Angeleses?

A Paradigm of Multicentricity

Let me first turn to multicentricity as a conceptual angle. Above all, the notion of multicentricity privileges different entities' right to centricity. It has the discursive effect of allowing each center—or unit, kind, group, the “genus” in heterogeneity—to assert its autonomy, even when it simultaneously compels each center to acknowledge the copresence of its own margins and of other centers. Noting the centricity of a particular Los Angeles, for example, means recognizing its material and circumstantial specificities as well as considering its relations to power, wealth, and common well-being resulting from such constitutive specificities. While an accent on centricity sanctions this Los Angeles's claim to cultural autonomy, a simultaneous attention to multicentricity discloses its relative positioning in the sociopolitical network shared with other Los Angeleses. Raymond A. Rocco puts this dynamic in more concrete terms, “We need to view each ‘Los Angeles’ as constituting a particular, specific, and concrete way of living in and through the city that is both bounded and linked to other sectors by its particular configuration of factors such as race, class, gender, immigrant status, political access, and economic resources.”[25] Rocco's comment emphasizes the particularities pertaining to the material conditions of each Los Angeles and the interconnections among different Los Angeleses. His map of Los Angeleses is coordinated by multicentricity.

Multicentricity as a strategy for cultural intervention focuses on the conceptual level. The multicentric paradigm serves to activate a procedure of cognizance that may eventually change general perceptions about the status of minoritization. Being center connotes the existence of an independent, if not unique, sphere, within which a self-referential network of signifying systems operates. Granted that a center must always be bound by other centers in a multicentric situation, the cognizance of its own centricity exposes those outside forces that seek to marginalize it as arbitrary and unduly oppressive. Those dominating forces then seem
no longer “warranted” or “naturalized” by the status quo. In this capacity, the concept of multicentricity subverts the existing power structure, which takes for granted the boundary between the “majority” and the “minority,” between “dominant” cultures and “marginal” others. The multicentric paradigm consequently has the potential to become a resistant strategy for those who are involuntarily relegated to the margins by the existing power structure.

Multicentricity is, however, far from being an activist solution to present cultural dilemmas. It does not purport to be an ethical or redressive measure, as does “multiculturalism.” Multiculturalism, at least in its idealistic phase, aspires to institute fundamental changes in the directions and definitions of “national cultures” through education, hiring principles, and media advocacy. With “multicentricity,” my intent is to offer a more precise description for an existing phenomenon in the city I live. Being descriptive rather than prescriptive, multicentricity has no direct political stake or any immediate practical consequence. I may see myself as central, for example, but my claim to centricity does not automatically promote my upward social mobility or offer me affordable health insurance. My others, who both circumscribe me and reside elsewhere, may be much more powerful than I am at this given moment. Depending on the criteria of evaluation, my Los Angeles, which is central to me, may still be placed in the margins in relation to other Los Angeleses. Conversely, I may wish to define my centricity by my marginality or to identify myself as an other. My Los Angeles, evoked in my own tongue, becomes then another Los Angeles, an other's Los Angeles, or the other Los Angeles—not the one Los Angeles known in clichés. My saying this, however, does not erase the clichéd Los Angeles, or even the clichés. The efficacy of multicentricity as a concept lies primarily in the power of naming.

Naming may facilitate revolution, but naming is not in itself a revolution. The phenomenon of multicentricity witnessed in this region clearly does not bring about equivalence, equilibrium, or equality among the many Los Angeleses. If I've found my portrait of multicentric Los Angeleses, it would stress that heterogeneity, multiplicity, and incongruity exist both within and between centers. Each Los Angeles has to deal with conflicts, differences, and incommensurabilities within itself. Likewise, it has to handle a complex ramification of relationships with other Los Angeleses, including opposition (antagonism among competing entities), coexistence (parallel subsistence among different entities), coalition (cooperation between different entities for mutual benefit), and hybridity (merging with other entities). Multicentricity and Polarity

The discursive emphasis on multicentricity tends to blur the tenacious polarity underlying the polycentered and polyglot veneer of heterogeneity. Numerous accounts by urban theorists reveal the widening gap between the haves and the have-nots in the many Los Angeleses. Michael Dear, for one, holds a somber view: “In social terms, postmodern L.A. is a city split between extreme wealth and poverty, in which a glittering First World city sits atop a polyglot Third World substructure.” Dear's analysis echoes what Scott and Soja observe as “an intensified bifurcation of regional labor markets”:

On the one hand, there has been a growing high-wage, high-skill group of workers (managers, business executives, scientists, engineers, designers, and celebrities and many others in the entertainment industry); on the other hand, there has been an even more rapidly expanding mass of marginalized, low-wage, low-skill
workers, the majority of whom are women and often undocumented Latino and Asian immigrants, who find employment throughout the service sector and in a widening pool of manufacturing sweatshops, from the garment industry to electronics assembly. Between these two strata is the traditional skilled and semiskilled blue-collar working class, which has been shrinking with such rapidity that it is now commonly referred to as the disappearing middle stratum of Southern California society.\[29\]

Los Angeles's present multicentricity coexists with the persistent polarity between the current hegemony and its others. Such polarity condenses the surface of multicentricity into two opposing entities—the center and its margins. Neither the center nor its margins can be delineated without contradictions. Both recognize the inequitable power status that exists between them and both register the pressure of contradictions. On the one hand, in the polarized picture where the current hegemony still owns the large central ground, to describe a surface that allows multicentric expressions tends to gloss over the undercurrent inequality. On the other hand, multicentricity does affect the existing polarity between the established parties and their others. This contradictory scenario reflects the nature of hegemony theorized by Antonio Gramsci. As Lisa Lowe explicates, Gramsci's notion of hegemony works both ways—for the dominant class as well as the marginalized class. Gramsci maintains that any specific hegemony, though it may be for the moment dominant, is never absolute or conclusive.\[30\] Thus, I suggest, similar to multicentricity, the polarity evinced in contemporary L.A. resides in constant fluctuation. The current hegemony is always subject to the contestation, resistance, and counterhegemonic forces launched from the margins.

Observing the economic inequality, the collapse of communities, and the increasing urban fragmentation, Michael Dear concludes his essay on postmodern L.A. with a warning and a plea: “This polycentric, polarized, polyglot metropolis long ago tore up its social contract and is without even a draft of a replacement. […] This is the insistent message of postmodern Los Angeles: all urban place-making bets are off; we are engaged, knowingly or otherwise, in the search for new ways of creating cities.”\[31\] Before we find those new ways, Angeleno/as have to live in a paradox: there are many Los Angeleses, and there are two implicitly separate Los Angeleses: the multicentric and the polarized L.A.

Let's return again to Edge Painting. Contemporary Los Angeles has both revised the painting's structure of centricity into multicentricity and remained in agreement with its original structure, which polarizes an elusive middle with multiple entities in the margins. With the revision, we are able to name the

many Los Angeleses. With the status quo, however, we know that there is a Los Angeles owned by the current hegemony—whatever its constitution is—and, surrounding it, edging from the margins, are other Los Angeleses.

Performance Art in Multicentric Los Angeleses

Come to the edge, she says
They say: We are afraid
Come to the edge, she says
They come
She pushes them … and they fly
A malleable medium open to many possibilities, performance art best illustrates the frontier spirit, the eclectic conflation, and the rule-defying characteristics of L.A. cultures—(I'll let “L.A.” stand as my shorthand for the multicentric and polarized Los Angeleses). In its nearly four decades of history in L.A., performance art has acquired a unique position by emulating the city's multicentric artistic ethos: its aesthetic heterogeneity, multiple agencies, and parallel constituencies. Performance art defies definitions, embraces contradictions, and rebels against formalist confinement. It has engendered a mélange of events ranging from the esoteric and ephemeral to the committed and proactive. In some extreme cases, the risk-taking nature of live action has even placed artists on the verge of death. Since it is a medium that absorbs and expends most of its energy from being on edge, performance art tends to keep an ambivalent distance from the cultural mainstream but maintains productive associations with other cultures. The majority of performance projects in L.A. are low-tech, performer-centered, concept-or processoriented, “poor theater” pieces—distinctly antithetical to the sleek finesse and technological ingenuity of the city's blockbuster films. More an art of necessity than an art catering to commercial interest, performance art continues to mimic, forge, and embody what we may call Los Angeles fringe sensibilities. Metaphorically, performance art has produced its own variable series of “edge paintings,” inventing miniature cultural signifiers for the phantom galleries in Other Los Angeleses.

A Definition of Performance Art

Given the amorphous proclivities of performance art, I describe it broadly as an intermedia visual art form that uses theatrical elements in presentation.

Every semantic unit in my definition has specific references. The category “performance art” emerged in the early 1970s, although the term is now applied retrospectively to other live art activities, including, in Kristine Stiles's enumeration, “happenings, Fluxus, actions, rituals, demonstrations, direct art, destruction art, event art, and body art, among others.” Most practitioners today prefer the shortened appellation “performance” over “performance art,” while art commentators often use the two terms interchangeably. The word “intermedia” evokes Dick Higgins's 1966 “Statement on Intermedia,” which advocates the “intermedial approach, to emphasize the dialectic between the media” as a contemporary way of making art. Performance art highlights such an intermedial approach by drawing on multiple disciplines. To stress performance art as a “visual art form” recalls its art history lineage. The “theatrical elements” used in presenting performance art indicate the basic components of what I like to call the theatrical matrix: time, space, action, performer, and audience. Performance art is highly adaptable in form, content, and situation; it is often site-specific, of unpredictable duration, and highly aware of the immediate environment. Performance art's relative ease of presentation, intentional volatility, and interactive context allow it to tackle point-blank the phobias, drifts, and traumas that crisscross contemporary cultures. As Rose-Lee Goldberg aptly phrases it, performance art, traversing “a thin divide between high culture and popular entertainment,” “retains a tentativeness that allows the obsessions of our cultural moment to seep from its edges.” Perhaps the combination of sensitivity and expediency has enabled this permissive mode to develop an intimate, if also complex, tie with L.A. cultures. Sometimes performance art functions as an index to the shifting cultural trends; sometimes it
reveals the symptoms of sedimentary social ills; sometimes it probes into taboos, stereotypes, or other calcified public myths; sometimes it launches frontal attacks against received ideas and inherited prejudices; sometimes it stages cleansing rituals to treat personal or communal wounds; sometimes it pushes against its own limits as an aesthetic methodology, contributing to the city's imaginary commonwealth. Although it may not have accomplished all that the artists have intended or claimed to do, one thing is sure: performance art aspires to be contemporaneous with L.A. cultures.

Performance art's heterogeneous modality corresponds to this coastal region's psychic vista of cross-cultural ferment. Because of its ambivalence toward the mainstream culture, performance art is most directly linked with other cultures. This intermedia art form either defines itself by its otherness from the cultural status quo or is defined by the status quo as its other. In this light, performance art may be seen as a live art medium slated for the (partial) making of other cultures in Other Los Angeleses.

**Naming Performance Art in Multicentric L.A.:**

**A Midway Self-Critique**

My approach to performance art hinges on the proposition that this hybrid medium has a pronounced relation to its surrounding cultures. Like a sponge, performance art absorbs what permeates its cultural ambiance and spills out the excess qualities. I see performance art, then, more as a flexible mode of cultural expression than as a specialized medium belonging to any particular aesthetic discipline. I argue that contemporary performances in L.A. are multicentric because the region is multicentric. This admittedly inclusive approach is inspired by performance art’s own democratic impulse to be an open-ended and accessible medium, by its existential connection with the practitioner as an individual subject, and by its phenomenological interest in intersubjective engagement within the performer-audience context.\[41\]

My take on performance as a cultural expression highlights its status as an art practice that exists in and for the public realm. Since no sacredness (no setting apart as a privileged realm) is presumed for an art practice that solicits public interest, I contend that performance art is conceptually owned by whoever desires to name it. This public ownership of performance art explains why so many politicians and media pundits feel licensed to critique performance pieces without having seen them. The public perception of conceptual ownership concerning an artwork is certainly not unique to performance art, for it derives largely from media coverage of controversial contemporary art. But this conceptual ownership does complicate the act of naming performance art. Who, we wonder, has the right to name performance art—the artist, the art historian, the theater scholar, the cultural critic, or a couple of travelers from Australia who have just seen a piece? What has been named—an intermedial visual art form, a boundary-breaking theatrical medium, or a nebulous cultural practice? Who must bear the burden or wear the accolade of such naming—the artists who evade categorization at all costs, or those who eagerly take on the category for its very elusiveness? Who can pass judgment on any single name invented to decipher an evolving public art phenomenon—the practitioner, the critic, the spectator, the journalist, the publisher, the cultural vanguard, the art funder, or the taxpayer?
These are all difficult questions, and my book does not promise any definitive answer. Indeed, by defining performance art, I inevitably limit its aesthetic, conceptual, and political possibilities according to my theoretical premises. Confronting an art form that embraces mutability, no single definition can claim to capture its “true” essence. That does not mean we should refrain from making definitions, but we must recognize that any definition is provisional, reductive, and contingent. Once made, a definition is subject to displacement by subsequent performance configurations. While this situation, again, is not unique to performance, performance's status as a live art enacted for other live bodies makes it particularly resistant to discursive fixity. Performance exposes the profound incommensurability between discursive inventions (language, category, theory, definition) and individual bodies (artists, materials, circumstances, the evolving art products). So long as performance continues to attract practitioners, the medium will transform with those individual bodies, which extravagantly exceed/elude naming.

But naming is what I do with my present act of stringing words together, knowing that my naming cannot but put some indomitable historical phenomena into discursive frames, while trailing behind those unfolding others that continue to happen beyond my frames. The concept of multicentricity that informs my practice of naming empowers me to accept my perceptual/conceptual centricity as the pivot of my investigation. At the same time it reminds me of the coexistence of multiple other perspectives. The reminder of multiple other centers adjacent to my own renders my version of performance genealogy in L.A. only one among many other possible versions—both extant and to come. I am not asserting that all different versions of performance genealogy are of equal validity or stature. Rather, the awareness of multicentricity brings to the fore the subjective grounding of my work. It recontextualizes my inquiry as a volitional action responding primarily to the call of my individual agency.

My action recognizes my individual agency as a channel of my perceptions and a means of reprocessing what I've learned from my object of inquiry. In effect, it evinces not so much the power as the need of my individual agency, for I cannot claim a transcendental authority (power) for my work (being merely one among many), yet I am driven by an inexplicable compulsion (need) to do the work. This need is partially professional but profoundly existential. I can best explain it by borrowing from Samuel Beckett's wry paradox: “the expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express.”[42] This passage yields an intriguing reading of the paradigm of decentered centricity embodied by Edge Painting. Beckett interprets the blankness that occupies his authorial centricity as an inherent failure, a depletion of significance, competence, and purpose that nullifies his attempt to write. Beckett the writing subject is placed at a point of exhaustion even before he starts. Yet he is compelled to meet “the obligation” to express. He cannot but accept the radical inadequacy—the in expressible “nothing”—of his centricity/subjectivity, from which his expression emanates, in order to act/write at all. Since he confesses that “there is nothing to express,” his words will always fail to signify the void that has consumed his center. The signifiers that come to him as he writes end up merely scratching the surface of his core, inscribing an ephemeral edge to the “nothing” at the center. His “edge” writing therefore cannot purport to express the truth or meanings he found. It becomes nothing but the present-tense enactment of his
centricity/subjectivity mobilized in an act of naming. There is no a priori authority assumed by his writerly centricity in a struggle for expression. On the contrary, he demonstrates and enacts his centricity moment to moment by writing: it is a cumulative and composite portrait constituted by his words. His act of expression can then be considered an individual performance that addresses both the exigency of naming (the edge) and the in eluctable partiality of the thing named (the center). His writing is emphatically “performative,” in the sense defined by J. L. Austin as the utterance of a word or a sentence that is not simply a speech, but itself an action.\[63\]

My conception of writing as a performative act accentuates the serial labor of finding and placing the words into a certain order as an embodied action. It doubles the process of writing with that of staging a virtual, interactive scene between the writer, her/his writerly quest, and the projected readers/audience members. It makes explicit the tacit recognition of writing as improvisational, contingent upon emergent circumstances, and susceptible to change, compromise, reductiveness, time constraint, faulty judgment, and accidental manipulation. (Don't we all dance, wittingly or not, under the influence of magic, memory, and mortality?) Undertaking performative writing provides a temporary relief for the writer because it conceptually encodes her/his impotence in expressing the elusive multiplicity of the world in an immediate action. It declares the individual's will to survive and produce as a decentered yet nonetheless self-referential subject/center in a multicentric universe. My single act of naming, then, can be best understood as a performing process, a happening in which my body experiences the fluctuating transitions between silence and articulation, always moving toward temporary truths.

With this self-critique, I offer my study not as a definitive text but an individual performance. The ensuing act charts a partial history of performance art's proliferating paths to multicentricity in Los Angeleses.

**A Cultural History of Performance**

As a cultural expression, performance art changes with the transforming cultures in L.A. As a live art medium, however, performance art does have its own centricity, which assumes a certain degree of internal consistency in its roughly four decades of residency in L.A. I therefore take both a diachronic and synchronic approach in exploring performance art's position in L.A.'s cultural history. The diachronic account aims to historicize performance art in the particular urban contexts of L.A. because the city has undergone drastic changes since the 1970s. The synchronic account analyzes how performance art has developed its particular ways of relating to L.A. These are structural paradigms that remain relatively consistent throughout the various decades.

This exposé presents a performance genealogy in L.A. by examining how performance art has transformed from its visual art foundation in the 1970s into a multicentric cultural expression in subsequent decades. From its diverse practices, I observe three characteristic ways in which performance art interacts with L.A., serving reflective, redressive, and generative functions to mirror, critique, and replenish the city's other cultures.

In my conception, performance's multicentricity arises from the interrelations among the reflective, redressive, and generative functions in their respective and joint interfaces with L.A. The three functions address the contribution of performance art to the continuous making
of other cultures in L.A. Although they do not represent the artists' conscious goals or individual agendas, my introduction of these functions into a discussion of L.A. performances does honor the artists' intents to situate their works in the immediate physical, social, and cultural environments. This insistence on engagement with immediate others—be they the specific site, the presentation context, the contingencies of process, or the projected viewers—both enables and compels performance artists to reconceptualize the purposes, meanings, and impacts of art-making in a changing world. During such re-envisioning, many performance artists shift their concerns from creating objects or conforming to the vagaries of international art markets to investigating how their work may impinge on the local art and nonart worlds. They also cultivate an attentiveness to the fortuitous happenings and contiguous associations triggered by the performance situations. It is through this shift to the immediate, the local, and the contiguous that the divergent performances covered here acquire their shared identity as L.A. art.

The Reflective Function

Geography and History

L.A. performance art has developed among multiple geographic centers that reflect the region's flung-out, polycentered urban typology. These geographic centers have fluctuated in numbers and varied in qualities, responding to L.A.'s changing cultural preoccupation.

According to Richard S. Weinstein, the primary image of L.A. is of “an extended repetitive fabric, bounded by the sea or mountain edge overlaid with a discontinuous, contrapuntal net of freeways, with periodic concentrations of high-rise development that are conceptually mapped during high-speed travel.” Weinstein's description captures the sprawling urban landscape, the ecological diversity, and the automobile dependence typical of L.A. experiences. Such experiences of expansiveness, repetition, variety, isolation, speed, and transience are reinforced by three prevalent characteristics of the city's built environment: “The matrix is the prevailing latticework of intersecting grids in which a variety of uses are distributed. This matrix is laced by linear developments of greater commercial density from boulevards down to strips. Density is also clustered at nodes, or activity centers.”

L.A.'s urban geography, paired with a history of focused development in the motion picture industry, has produced an art world fragmented and segregated into separate systems, networks, and pockets, including little privatized galleries, theaters, and clubs; underground communes; isolated museums; and other insular art institutions. The city's specific circumstance allowed the dominant Hollywood industry to create its famous “lineal developments”—the Sunset Boulevard and the adjacent band stretching from North Hollywood to Culver City—but it discouraged similar development of a Broadway theater district, an Off-Broadway or Off-Off-Broadway alternative fringe, a So Ho, or an East Village. Before the 1960s there was hardly any significant art world besides that of Hollywood, which attained its supremacy as “the Industry” of L.A. starting in the 1920s. The first gathering places for the city's emergent avant-garde in the late 1950s were isolated spots, such as the Circle Theater in Hollywood, founded by Rachel Rosenthal for her Instant Theater in 1956, or the Ferus Gallery at La Cienega Boulevard, founded by Walter Hopps and Ed Kienholz in 1957. The development of L.A.'s contemporary art scenes depended on these emergent self-contained and geographically dispersed nodes, or activity centers.
Multiscaled Nodes in Performance History

The existence of various multiscaled nodes of cultural activities dictates the pattern of distribution for performance art; the presence of performance art in turn adds cultural values to those nodes. In some early cases where no permanent nodes were available or desirable, performance art created some nomadic nodes of activities by gathering an audience. In a city where the public realm has been devalued by extreme privatization and the need for constant motion to conquer geographic distance, performance art has actively contributed to the temporary forming of public realms.

Different types of nodes appeared for performance activities in L.A. They moved from individual-occasioned, temporary nodes (artists and their performance sites) to academic nodes (art schools and university art programs) to cooperative and privatized nodes (performance presentation venues and artist-run performance workshops) to community-based nodes (neighborhood or special-interest cultural centers) to institutional nodes (museums). No matter how these types evolved with the transforming performance art, they reflect the geocultural dispersal characteristic of L.A.'s lived environment.

NOMADIC NODES IN THE 1960S

In the 1960s, when performance art was newly introduced to L.A., the nodes of performance activities were sporadic and contingent, as they were carried—like a snail's spiral shell—by individual artists. The nodes centered around the sites where pioneering events took place or where performance workshops were taught. These temporarily created, nomadic nodes followed the trajectory of numerous visiting artists who were involved in Happenings, Fluxus, and the Judson Dance Theater in New York City.

Both Allan Kaprow and Claes Oldenburg, two principal figures in New York Happenings, staged influential performance events, according to Moira Roth. Oldenburg's *Autobodys* (1963) took place in a downtown L.A. parking lot, involving barricades, flashing lights, cement trucks, milk bottles, and other vehicle-related objects. Kaprow's spectacular *Fluids* (1967) consisted of “building huge, blank, rectangular ice structures 30 feet long, 10 feet wide, and 8 feet high,” with 650 ice blocks per structure, cemented by rock salt. Over a three-day period, volunteers constructed these quasi-architectural ice structures in about twenty places throughout L.A. The event thus featured a performative sculpture in a constant state of fluidity, its performance lasting until all the structures melted and evaporated. These two Happenings by Oldenburg and Kaprow address/reflect crucial elements of L.A. experiences: cars, unpredictability, vigilance, isolation, displacement, spatial dispersion, surprising or fortuitous encounters, and ephemerality.

Another type of activity in the 1960s was introduced by the Judson dancers Yvonne Rainer, Steve Paxton, and Alex Hay, who organized performances and workshops on their visits to L.A. Alex Hay and his workshop students eventually presented “One Evening of Theater Pieces” in 1968. As Roth observes, the event produced by Hay “drew several hundred people and provided the Los Angeles art community with its first large-scale encounter with the burgeoning, and sometimes bewildering, art of Performance.”

PEDAGOGICAL NODES IN THE 1970S
In the 1970s, when the artists associated with Happenings, Fluxus, and action art started to get employment in academia, numerous art schools and university art departments emerged as the new educational nodes where performances flourished.\(^[51]\) Most notable were the graduate art program at the University of California at Irvine in Orange County, the Disney-endowed California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) in Valencia, and the Woman's Building, which housed the Feminist Studio Workshop, an independent school for women, in downtown L.A.

The graduate art program at UC Irvine began in 1969, attracting the first class of students who independently transformed their academic art training into performance art activities.\(^[52]\) These graduate students soon founded an off-campus cooperative gallery called F Space in Santa Ana to accommodate their performances. It was mostly in the F Space that Chris Burden, then an Irvine student, performed a series of daredevil body art pieces. Burden's extreme performances, coated with controversy and mystique, first brought L.A. performance art to national media attention.

The greatest contribution of CalArts at this period was the Feminist Art Program, codirected by Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro.\(^[53]\) Originally founded by Chicago with a group of students at Fresno State College in 1970, the program moved to CalArts in 1971, bringing many students from Fresno to Valencia. Adopting the proto-performance pedagogy devised by Chicago at Fresno, the CalArts program encouraged the students to recognize the significance of gender and sexual difference in their art-making. Chicago and Schapiro led twenty-one female students to create an autonomous node of feminist activities off-campus: a collaborative environment called Womanhouse. The participants transformed a condemned mansion in residential Hollywood into a site-specific installation and hosted a series of performances for public viewing in this reinvented domestic node between January 30 and February 28, 1972.\(^[54]\)

The plastic, painterly, and performative activities initiated in Womanhouse created a precedent for feminist organizations centered around the Woman's Building, an educational, performance, and activist node that moved from site to site in L.A. until it closed in 1991. For almost two decades, the Woman's Building served as a hotbed of feminist ideas, a gathering place, and an exhibition space for feminist performances.\(^[55]\)

**WIDE-RANGING NODES IN THE 1980S**

In the 1980s L.A. enjoyed a boom in general cultural investment aided by ambitious developers, entertainment moguls, and other financiers, who rode the tides of the land-rush capitals from Japan and Canada. These mercenaries turned-art-sponsors, recognizing “culture” as an asset in the land development process, began to “patronize the art market, endow the museums, subsidize the regional institutes and planning schools, award the architectural competitions, dominate the arts and urban design taskforces, and influence the flow of public arts money.”\(^[56]\) This infusion of cultural affluence occasioned a virtual explosion of performance energy, which activated the city's cultural substrata. Correspondingly there was a great increase in multiscaled nodes available for performances. Most of these nodes adapted models established in earlier decades, such as the artist-run nonprofit organization, the pedagogical
link to performance, and the nomadic node spurred by ad hoc outdoor performance activities. New models also emerged in the 1980s, including, in particular, individual artist-curated presentational pockets and community-centered art spaces.

Prominent among the alternative spaces run by artists, collectors, and writers were the Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art (LAICA) and Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE), both founded during the 1970s and persisting in the 1980s, offering important downtown venues for exhibitions, music concerts, and performances. According to artist Luis Alfaro, there were three major “schools” tying pedagogy to performance art in the 1980s: Tim Miller’s “tell it like it is” school centered at Highways Performance Space in Santa Monica; Rachel Rosenthal’s “doing by doing” school centered at her studio, Espace DbD, on the Westside; and Scott Kelman’s “an actor with an idea” school, which ran through several downtown venues managed by him and Alex Wright, including the now-defunct Pipeline, Inc., the Wallensboyd, and Boyd Street Theater. Among these three multifunctional nodes, the most active and diverse has been Highways, established in 1989 by Miller and Linda Frye Burnham, the founding editor of High Performance magazine, which was a significant channel for performance documentation and critiques for two decades (1978–98).

Artist Anna Homler recalled L.A. in the 1980s as a splendid performance town where “every artist was performing in everyone else's show, supporting each other's effort.” A radical art turned Fringe chic, free performances proliferated outdoors, in public plazas, and on the beach. Homler, for example, began her esoteric incarnation of the ancient Breadwoman, putting a fresh loaf of bread on her head and walking through a farmer's market in the mid-Wilshire section of L.A. She subsequently wore a self-baked bread mask as the mouthless Breadwoman (fig. 2) and performed a wave dance in the market. Spectacular large-scale, but low-budget, performances were created by two directors/artists: Lin Hixson and Reza Abdoh. As art critic Jacki Apple historicizes, a new performance scene coalesced around Hixson, whose collaborative performance pieces usually “began with images and gestures lifted from films” and proceeded to make wry comments on American pop and media culture. The late Iranian-Italian Reza Abdoh, on the other hand, tackled the taboo terrain of sexual subcultures. Abdoh produced performances in abandoned
mansions and other bizarre locations before staging a series of controversial multimedia events at the Los Angeles Theater Center (LATC) between 1989 and 1991.\textsuperscript{[60]}

This climate of bohemian festivity and cooperative spirit manifested itself especially in the alternative presentation pockets run by individual artists/curators. At the same time as she assumed the position of performance coordinator at LACE in 1980, Hixson opened her own Industrial Street loft in downtown L.A. for independent performance activities.\textsuperscript{[61]} John O'Brien, likewise, coordinated a series of performance art evenings called “The Pink House” (1987–90) in his own living quarters. He described “The Pink House” series as “no more than a postcard. It invited people to come and see eight to twelve performances. I performed one and I would curate the rest. The works were very diverse, representing the whole gamut, racially, aesthetically, and [genderwise].”\textsuperscript{[62]} Hixson's and O'Brien's curatorial projects illustrate the isolated formation of interest-generated nodes of performance activities.

Another type of sociocultural node emerged in response to the underside of the Reagan era's materialism. In contrast to the boom that endorsed “the concentration of cultural assets in nodes of maximum development” like Westwood and Bunker Hill, a cultural depression occurred in most of the inner city, where such vital spots “for community self-definition as the Watts Tower Art Center, the Inner City Cultural Center, and the Bilingual Foundation of the Arts” all suffered from drastic cuts.\textsuperscript{[63]} Several emergent community-based art centers, however, proactively countered this aggravated polarity. John Malpede collaborated with the downtown Law Center to start a free performance workshop with homeless participants from Skid Row.\textsuperscript{[64]} A few blocks away from Skid Row, the city-owned LATC, managed by Bill Bushnell and Diana White, began commissioning ethnic minority artists to create performances that would speak to audience members from the immediate neighborhoods.\textsuperscript{[65]}
MULTIFUNCTIONAL NODES IN THE 1990S AND AFTER

The perennial imbalance of economic, political, and cultural assets between the hegemonic classes and others deteriorated during the 1980s. With the onset of recession, the rising unemployment rate, and the white racism exposed by the Rodney King's beating trial, the frustration of L.A.'s “underclasses” erupted in the 1992 South Central urban insurrection. The trauma of South Central epitomized the darkened moods in the performance circles.

A decade's cultural boom proved to be a mirage for many alternative art centers and vanguard galleries. By the mid-1990s LAICA and LATC had folded; LACE moved from downtown to a Hollywood storefront site and stopped producing regular performance art programs. Just as “performance art” became a ubiquitous party topic after the media furor over the “NEA Four,” there was a decrease in the multiscaled nodes devoted to performance. Several artist-run spaces for performance training and presentation have remained, however, most notably, Highways. Some multifunctional nodes have become associated with particular troupes, such as Espace DbD, featuring works by the Rachel Rosenthal Company, and La Boca in South Central L.A., with resident artists Oguri and Roxanne Steinberg, who teach dance/performance in their “Body Weather Laboratory” workshops. Occasionally other private and institutional nodes have presented performances: The Brewery Project, an alternative gallery run by John O'Brien in downtown L.A.; the Barnsdall Art Park Gallery Theater in Hollywood; Cal State L.A. in East L.A.; Glaxa Studio Theatre in Silverlake; and Art Center in Pasadena.

An interesting twist occurred in the late 1980s and intensified in the 1990s with the accretion of other institutional nodes for performances. The HBO Workspace, housed in the Melrose Theatre in Hollywood, emerged as the “Industry” venue to produce monthly performance programs, focusing on standup comedies. Following the precedents of the Long Beach Museum of Art and the Santa Monica Museum of Art, three well-endowed museums—the Geffen Contemporary at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA), Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), and the Armand Hammer Museum of Art—all featured performance as a unique contemporary art genre in three major exhibitions in 1998. Performance art has thus found another center in L.A., in the center for canonization in art history. Now that the Getty Museum has begun hosting occasional live performances, we know that performance art is recognized as a staple in the local art and culture diets.

Multicentric Cultural Sites

Since its inception, L.A. performance art has been an art of multicentric locations. The dwindling of presentation venues does not minimize the medium's multicentricity, but rather exacerbates the sense of physical distance among these locations. These geographical sites for performance are conditioned by the city's own polycentric urban structure. Performance art itself as an expressive medium, however, has actively mobilized multicentric cultural sites. These cultural sites are constituted by the artists' identities, their ideological affiliations, the different purposes behind their art-making, and the divergent routes through which they migrate into performance art. I suggest that the multicentricity within performance art reflects the diversity and complexity of L.A.'s own cultural terrains.

L.A. performance art began as an independent medium associated with visual arts. Most earlier performance practitioners identified themselves as visual artists and consciously adopted the emergent medium to contest or dialogue
with art history. Women artists, especially, migrated en masse to performance art because of the medium's capacity to address the pertinence of sexual difference and other issues relevant to feminism. Although the field was already diverse, visual artists represented the largest constituency in the 1970s performance scene. During the next two decades, however, performance became thoroughly multidisciplinary. It has attracted not only painters, sculptors, and photographers but also poets, dancers, musicians, filmmakers, actors, and theater artists, as well as activists, teachers, healers, journalists, accountants, caterers, computer programmers, and other nonartists.

My research reveals that the shift within performance art has had much to do with L.A.'s history as an entertainment capital without a substantial tradition of experimental art. Many artists are drawn to L.A. because of its mythicized freedom from an established cultural structure that may “dictate norms of experimental behavior.” Even more move to L.A. for the availability of creative work related to the Industry, which now encompasses motion pictures, network and cable television, commercials and other ads, music CDs and videos, theme parks, cyber-technology, and other design professions. These artists are attracted to the existing opportunities of performance as parallel and often more accessible outlets for their creative energies. They do performances to immerse themselves in an artistic process relatively free from commercial pressures and compartmentalized corporate partnership systems. Still other artists, who have no desire to “break into the Industry,” adopt performance as an immediate medium to explore the hybrid potentials of multiple static and kinetic arts. As for those who are not artists, performance becomes not only their rite of initiation into art but also their passport to the city's imaginary polis of cultural expressions.

An art form driven by centrifugal forces and the logic of inclusion, performance follows a trajectory that refracts L.A.'s own centrifugal development into an extended city of multiple centers. It perpetuates itself and multiplies through existing artist-run workshops, which recruit students from both art and nonart worlds. These workshops take performance as a flexible method to create live presentations that integrate text, music, movements, and multimedia visual arts. They also teach performance as an approach to self-renewal, which connotes a more introspective assessment of the participants' subjective locations in the cultural sites that condition and enable their daily lives. This specific local context has complicated performance's standing as an aesthetic medium.

In fine, performance in L.A. has assumed a dual status: as a live art medium and as a mode of cultural expression. The field of actions for performance has become much broader, synonymous with what Antonin Artaud phrases as “culture-in-action.” Performance supplies its practitioners with a set of positive strategies and critical vocabularies, which enable them to create wideranging civic, existential, political, aesthetic, or spiritual expressions that bear on both the individual and the communal level. These cultural projects enacted through performances variously affirm and question individual identities, while they scrutinize and strengthen communal (familial, social, religious, intracultural, cross-cultural, and other) relations. Combining the emphases on the private and the public reinforces performance's dual status as art and culture. This is where performance's reflective function overlaps with its redressive and generative functions to become a motivating force behind L.A.'s other cultures.
The dual status of performance intensifies the medium's multicentricity, reflecting and reinforcing L.A.'s own multicentric cultures, which are shaped increasingly by epochal demographic changes. The composition of performance practitioners, likewise, mirrors the diversity of L.A.'s populations, differentiated as they are by races, ethnicities, genders, sexual orientations, classes, ages, sizes, physiological abilities, nationalities, immigrant status, professions, areas of residence, ideologies, leisure hobbies, pet-raising tips, cellular phone subscriptions, and cooking recipes. This catalog of multicentric diversity can go on ad infinitum, imitating the heteropolis's limitless horizontality.

**The Redressive Function**

**Redressive Performance**

More often than not, performance is an art form discontented with the status of being just an art form. I use the redressive function to note performance's self-conscious attempt to be more than it should or need be. By virtue of its goals, the redressive function places performance in between artistic invention and cultural intervention; it galvanizes performance to address both the meta-reality of art and the empirical reality of life. *Redressive performance*, my term for the genre that has grown out of the redressive function, seeks to break away from its self-referential systems of signification in order to merge with the interwoven fabric of social existence.

Performance artists with redressive tendencies follow the renegade spirit of the European avant-garde and the postwar international action artists. They defy the Kantian theory of aesthetic autonomy and insist on a phenomenological involvement with the surrounding perceptual world. They refashion the role of artist from an individual of virtuoso talents to a subject who experiences and fulfills her/his subjectivity by intersubjective engagement. They change the meaning of artistic skills from a masterful control of intentionality to the abilities of creating bonding and interactions with other subjects.[72] The redressive artists relocate the telos of art-making from within the conventional realms of art (galleries, museums, art journals and magazines, systems of commerce and distribution for art objects, the evaluation regimes established by art critics and historians) to elsewhere (in the streets, lofts, basements, schools, town halls, hospitals, factories, prisons, temples, churches, asylums, halfway houses, convention centers, forests, zoos, parks, malls, transit shuttles, cyberspace, the earth, the cosmos).[73] These artists still make art to satisfy their viewers, their patrons and granters, and themselves, but, even more urgently, they make art to serve their neighbors, their fellow citizens, their own species and other species, their daily spheres and other less familiar worlds.

Performance's redressive function emerges in response to preexisting conditions of crisis, stasis, or malaise that plague the public and private realms. Redressive performance often entails a teleological intent, a purposive action, an interventional scheme, and a readiness to devise and alternate strategies. The performance takes place as a means to an end. The artist tends to invert the McLuhan axiom from “the medium is the message” to “the message is the medium.”[74] Performance's redressive function manifests in various rhetorical guises: parody, satire, accusation, advocacy, supplication, testimony, didacticism. In general, these performative devices serve the purposes of criticism, diagnosis, demonstration, or remedy, depending on the artist's stance and desired degrees of involvement.
Redressive performance may take multiple forms, such as a single-time event, a repeated ritual, a narrative ranting with multimedia spectacles, a boxing match, a pacifist protest, a fund-raising benefit, a long-running workshop, guerrilla theater, an improvised dance marathon, a large-scale activist demonstration, a communal healing prayer, a street parade with eye-catching puppets. The targets of redressive performance—the crisis, stasis, or malaise against which they react—could be social ills (economic inequality, political injustice, environmental hazards, epidemic outbreaks, imperialistic militarism, legalized racial discrimination), ideological prejudices (homophobia, misogyny, racism, classism, ageism, ableism, xenophobia, religious persecution, censorship), or individual dilemmas (psychological traumas, physical violations, inertia, phobias, obsessions, inhibitions, addictions).

Because of its multiplicity, redressive performance is neither inherently altruistic nor always activist; nor does it guarantee redemption. When centering around an individual subject, redressive performance may well be antisocial, solipsistic, reclusive, private, and extreme. Most redressive performances, however, are infused with a certain purposiveness, because they invest in the potential of art to transform life, cause social change, and improve global existence. The criteria of evaluation for redressive performance therefore are concerned less with the look of performance than with the process of its execution, the quality of its conclusion, and especially with its postmortem efficacy, including its short-term impact and long-term consequences.

The Prominence of Redressive Performance in the 1970s

Redressive performance is certainly not particular to L.A. In fact, during the 1970s, redressive performance was the most prominent genre in the field of performance art—so much so that many critics have theorized about performance art of the 1970s only in terms of redressive performance, disregarding other types of performance. Although they do not use the label "redressive performance," these critics place incipient performance art in the contexts of protest, activism, and rectification. Josette Féral, for instance, maintains that performance art was born "out of a movement of protest against established values," which represented the aesthetic order of an entire period that privileged representation, rehearsal, memory, and the finished art products. She further asserts that performance art in the 1970s “had a clearly defined function”: that of “contestation.” This function, according to her, disappeared in the mid-1980s, when performance became merely one genre among many others.

Since the function of contestation fulfills the critical purpose of redress, Féral's account attests to the prominence of redressive performance in the international art scenes of the 1970s. I find, nevertheless, that Féral's analysis suffers from a totalizing tendency, subsuming a great variety of performances under the single function of protest. This totalizing tendency also affects her theorization about the sudden eclipse of performance's redressive function in the mid-1980s. Although I am provoked by her distinction between performance as a function and as a genre, I consider Féral's periodization arbitrary. My own observation suggests that performance has always been a genre with many functions among many other genres. Contrary to Féral, I argue that performance's redressive function did not disappear in the mid-1980s but persists today.

Early Strains of Redressive Performances in L.A.
As in the rest of the world, most L.A. performances in the 1970s were redressive. Great diversity, however, existed within this genre. Among the numerous concurrent strains of redressive performances were, notably, the “education of an un-artist” strain of lifelike performances revolving around Allan Kaprow's theory/practice and “the personal is the political” strain of feminist performances centered around CalArts and the Woman's Building. Both strains grappled with the collective experiences and ideological constructions pertaining to the social world, a domain including but not limited to the art world. Both inspired divergent outputs that mapped the aesthetic and conceptual parameters for L.A.'s redressive performances in the next two decades. These early strains of redressive performance provided promising antecedents, if not a direct genealogy, for subsequent works in this genre, especially for the type of redressive performance that intersected with multiculturalism in the late 1980s.

Common to these early strains were two attitudes that have established the conceptual sine qua non for redressive performance: the emancipation of eclipsed values and the empowerment of other subjects. In the first case, redressive performance aims at a conceptual re-formation, so as to liberate the cultural, moral, and ideological values that have become suspect or underrated by the current hegemony. In the second case, redressive performance strives to be an enabling discourse for individual subjects other than those who normally assume the position of power. In a performance situation, “other subjects” most directly signify those individuals other than the artists. As other subjects, spectators in a redressive performance are often jolted from their traditional roles as passive observers to become active participants. “Other subjects” may also refer to the status of the artists themselves, who differ from the hegemonic subjects either by cultural designation or by deliberate choice. At any rate, these artists contest the power assumed by what Audre Lorde calls “the mythic norm”: “white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, Christian and financially secure.” Of course there are performance artists whose personal identities happen to conform to this mythic norm. They may still consider themselves other subjects due to their emotional or ethical alienation from the mainstream.

These redressive attitudes found expression in the two performance strains that dominated L.A.’s radical cultural margins in the 1970s: lifelike performances inspired by Kaprow and feminist performances inspired by the feminist movement. Redressive performances associated with Kaprow's theory/practice seldom make the artists' personal identities an issue; instead, they tend to privilege the audience members as other subjects. Redressive performances shaped by feminisms, however, often invest in the artists’ identities as other subjects, while they simultaneously solicit the audience's support and distribute power performatively among artists and spectators.

LIFELIKE PERFORMANCES

A veteran of New York Happenings, Allan Kaprow joined the faculty at CalArts in 1969 and soon established himself as a conceptual fountainhead for performance experiments in Southern California. Moira Roth and Linda Frye Burnham, two experts on California performances in the 1970s, have both noted Kaprow's widespread influence—which, through his pioneering performances, prolific critical writings, and various academic appointments,
extended far beyond L.A. The live art events organized by Kaprow prefigured some important features of redressive performance: (1) the site-specific installation designating the performance structure (the physical and action frameworks), (2) the artist-designed performance score (the “what to do” in a performance), and (3) the incorporation of audience participation as an integral component in the performing process (i.e., the process depends on other subjects’ participation).

In 1959, at the Ruben Gallery in New York City, Kaprow set up a threeroom structure divided by plastic walls for 18 Happenings in 6 Parts — an event that gave the name “Happenings” to the performative activities that Kaprow began to produce and chronicle in the late 1950s. Some invited viewers had received instructions and little props from the artist before the event; they expected to simultaneously experience and become part of the Happenings. “There is no separation of audience and play,” Kaprow specifies in his 1961 essay “Happenings in the New York Scene.” His prototypical event at the Ruben Gallery carries out the conceptual sine qua non of redressive performance. He has partially exchanged his artistic control for audience interaction, allowing his artistic subjectivity to be realized through the voluntary participation of other subjects. Moreover, his performance privileges those values that had been dismissed by the dominant aesthetic order of the time. Kaprow’s 18 Happenings in 6 Parts relishes aesthetic impurity, incompleteness, rawness, contingency, lack of autonomy, self-reflexivity, impermanence—precisely those elements deemed anathema by the reigning Greenbergian school of modernist formalism.

THE BLURRING OF ART AND LIFE

What I term Kaprow’s theory/practice stresses the indivisible tie between his performance work and discursive articulation. Central to his (artistic) corpus is the merging of two (or more) seemingly discrete activities into a dynamic continuum. For him, theory is practice and practice theory. Together they make possible a deliberate space for free play and a prototype of redressive performance. They chivalrously project certain redressive functions in those group activities known as Happenings, which are preplanned yet largely improvised, hence lifelike. “Happenings are not just another new style,” argues Kaprow. “Instead, like American art of the late 1940s, they are a moral act, a human stand of great urgency, whose professional status as art is less a criteria than their certainty as an ultimate existential commitment.” These notes on “a moral act” of “great urgency” and on “existential commitment” implicitly link Happenings with two philosophical schools identified by Kristine Stiles as establishing “the fundamental political and philosophical condition” of performance art: Sartre’s existentialism, which privileges conscious individual action, and Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology.

which stresses the intersubjective copresence of self and others. Kaprow himself, however, is interested less in proposing paradigms for performance art than in exploring the favorite theme of his theory/practice: the blurring of art and life.

In proposing that art and life can or should be blurred, Kaprow presumes that a division between them exists; hence, the need for remedial measures to suture the division. The pursuit of these remedial measures, I suggest, delineates the teleology of Kaprow’s career. His experimental art activities started out in the 1960s to initiate certain altered “cultural attitudes” toward the unmarked zone “between what has been called art and ordinary life”; he wished to amend the “manufactured schizophrenia” that preordained their separation. Since the 1970s Kaprow has merged art-making with teaching, which is, supposedly, closer to life. In
this vein he published a series of essays entitled “Education of the Un-Artist,” a three-part manifesto/curriculum that proposes such categories as “Artart” and “Nonart.” The former presumes the condition of spiritual rarity and devotional seriousness in creating art; the latter is “whatever has not yet been accepted as art but has caught an artist's attention with that possibility in mind.”[86] I find Kaprow's coinages pertinent in that they both problematize the taken-for-granted attributes of art and foreground the spectrum of possibilities in the liminal zone between the special field of art and the convoluted, multicentric, yet mostly unself-conscious, terrains of life.

**UN-ARTING VERSUS ART-ARTING**

Kaprow's educational program proposes essentially three objectives: (1) unhinging the artists from their preoccupation with “Art art,” (2) training artists to perceive the richer and more fluid textures of “Nonart,” and (3) enabling artists to “un-art” themselves and give up any reference to being an artist. To me, this program offers a redressive procedure that may alter or deconstruct the stagnancy of a normative condition. As implied by his coinages, Kaprow is firmly ensconced in his identity as an artistintellectual, even though he does not make that identity an issue in his theory/practice. The normative condition in Kaprow's life and work might include a combination of an intense inquiry into the role of art in life, a constant evaluation of his own life/work position as an artist or an un-artist, and the inevitable negotiations with what he regards as the “moribund” conventions of art. Accordingly, Kaprow's redressive performances, which comprise his work as an artist, a critic, and a teacher, consist of dislocating that normative condition and un-arting himself, in order to utilize other possibilities of life. He intends to jettison the assumption that art is “a profession lacking inherent utility,” so as to direct his artistic gifts “toward those who can use them: everyone.”[87]

But not everyone is a Kaprow. Those whose normative condition of life has little to do with art might actually desire to art-art themselves, escaping into the aesthetic autonomy of art, thereby counteracting the excessive utility of their lives. The best artistic gift for one who has no basis for un-arting might be the gift of art-making itself. The education of an un-artist would then have little utility value for those nonlife-ists who toil daily in the spheres of nonart and long for the momentary transcendence of art art. Nor would the task of un-arting hold particular appeal for artists whose identities as artmakers, unlike Kaprow's, cannot be assumed and often have to be selfconfirmed, as is the case for women artists and artists of color in L.A.'s current art world. Although in his capacity as university professor Kaprow has trained several successive generations of artists, including males and females, Caucasians and other ethnic Americans, [88] his specific educational proposal for un-artists may not be applicable to all.

**FEMINIST PERFORMANCES**

The strongest alternative to Kaprow's un-arting agenda in the 1970s was the rise of feminist performance art, which coincided with the country's feminist movement. Inspired by the feminist movement's redressive campaign against the subjugation of women as a gendered class, feminist performance art aimed to undermine or rectify the cultural mythology of gender hierarchy. That many women artists chose performance as their medium was far from coincidental. As a relatively young medium, performance was not yet fully colonized by male artists, so there were fewer institutionalized obstacles barring women's practice. Performance
also offered the collective environment sorely needed for many women artists, most of whom suffered from isolation, lack of self-esteem, and doubts about their desires to practice art. Live performance helped these women process the information gathered from consciousness-raising meetings. The democratic format of consciousness-raising, which gave everyone a chance to speak, in turn influenced the permissive scope of feminist performances. The interactive context of performance, moreover, enabled these artists to gain proximity to an immediate audience, whose presence validated their art-making efforts, built up a spectatorial community for moral support, and offered a dynamic circuit of emotional, intellectual, and social exchange.

To be sure, not all performances by women advocate feminist causes, nor do they all concern experiences related to the female gender. I argue, however, that most performances shaped by a feminist awareness are redressive, for they consciously confront certain gender-specific values, criticize the discrimination based on sexual difference, and empower the artists as other/female subjects. Most feminist performances from the 1970s, the first fertile decade for many women artists, revealed the teleological tendency typical of redressive performance, which prizes content over form and message over medium. For these artists, the urgency of feminist discoveries overrode formalist or theatrical concerns about skills, aesthetic manipulation, and presentational polish. To contest the canonized masculocentric conceptions of art, many performances by women strove to articulate gynocentric conceptions of aesthetic problems and expression.

Many of the putatively gender-specific distinctions between male and female art treated by feminist performances are now open to debate, if not to charges of essentialism. When they were first conceived and publicized, however, these distinctions documented an ongoing struggle by women artists to subvert an entrenched patriarchal culture. Contrary to their male colleagues, who had the privilege to consider the benefits of un-arting, the first generation of feminist artists had to confront a cultural status quo that discounted, even ridiculed, their claims to artistic subjectivity. The normative condition of their life was to accept as axiomatic the assumed contradiction between their gendered identities as women and the status of being artists, for “artist” was a category historically constructed in Western culture as coincident with “the straight, white, upper-middle-class, male subject.” The intervention of feminist consciousness, however, propelled women artists to act against the grain by exposing their normative condition as a distortion resulting from sexual discrimination. They fought for their right to create serious art that acknowledged their sexual difference, redressing their cultural invisibility.

THE FEMINIST ART PROGRAM

Feminist performance art in L.A. gained initial momentum through the founding of an educational program and the construction of a collective environment—both strategies aimed at establishing an autonomous society of women that nurtured female-centered explorations. As mentioned earlier, the Feminist Art Program began in 1971 at CalArts, where Kaprow also taught. The first class of female students began their education of art-arting themselves by collaborating with one another to build a performative environment: Womanhouse. With both humor and earnestness, Womanhouse demonstrates what Kaprow regards as a compelling aspect of nonart: the evanescent process whereby nonart is transformed into art. This collaborative environment exhibits the largely unseen and undramatized aspects of women's
experiences in a domestic/domesticated setting. Not only are these nonart exhibits lifelike, but they are also framed and displayed as art.

Every re-created room in Womanhouse reveals and comments on the routine activities carried out by the conventionally unpaid domestic laborers—women in the house. The kitchen, for example, is wittily remade into an installation called Eggs to Breasts, with the ceiling and walls covered with fried eggs resembling breasts. A partitioned mannequin gets locked in between sheet and towels inside Sandy Orgel's Linen Closet. Judy Chicago's Menstruation Bathroom features, through a thin veil of gauze, a white, clean, and deodorized bathroom with bloody tampons and sanitary napkins flooding from a trash can. These interior sculptural sites double as a gendered structure for numerous redressive performances. Faith Wilding, wearing a gigantic satin penis, and Janice Lester, wearing a huge vagina, play a middle-class couple in Chicago's Cock and Cunt play. The play's rhythmic, telegraphic dialogues echo the dramatic modality of German expressionism. Its action moves from the wife's fights for equality in domestic duties, for mutual enjoyment in intercourse, to her eventual murder by the husband—beaten to death by his satin phallus. Birth Trilogy, enacted by six women, stages a ritual of birthing, nurturing, and loving through breathing, choral chanting, and body movements.

THE WOMAN'S BUILDING

Womanhouse established a prototype of a collective feminist art environment by offering women artists spaces, colleagues, and viewers for installations and live performances. This feminist prototype found a more permanent basis with the opening of the Woman's Building in 1973. A collaborative project with strong activist and educational initiatives, the Woman's Building housed the Feminist Studio Workshop—"the first independent feminist art-education institution"—and operated as a public venue for emerging women artists to gain access to an audience. It further addressed the efficacy of performance in feminist empowerment by hosting the first documentary exhibition of West Coast women's performance art. Because of its reputation as a cohesive women's art community, the Woman's Building quickly attained national visibility, attracted many more established women artists from across the nation to try out their performances, and effectively legitimized the nascent performance art medium. The presence of the Woman's Building attested to the need for a redressive institution that would foster the making of other cultures. Although not all performances by women during this period were sponsored by the Woman's Building, the institution's prominence heightened public interest in the burgeoning genre and succeeded in placing L.A.'s feminist performance on the map of contemporary art in the United States.

REDRESSIVE STRATEGIES IN PERFORMANCES BY WOMEN

The performances by women artists in the 1970s present a rich array of innovative strategies for redressive performance. The majority of these pieces adopt intentionally amateurish techniques, an agit-prop impetus, and kitsch sensibilities to subvert the mainstream preferences for artistic neutrality, intellectual abstraction, and methodological sophistication. These performances validate female experiences by venturing into territories previously deemed unworthy of public exposure: autobiographical narratives; unmarked
mental and physical labors; the institutions of marriage, family, and motherhood seen from women's perspectives.

The images, metaphors, and materiality of food, for example, are featured prominently, perhaps because food-making is traditionally a woman's labor/ work. In a pioneering piece, *Ritual Meal* (1969), created by Barbara T. Smith while a graduate student at UC Irvine, a group of guests are invited to a formal dinner served in test tubes and other laboratory apparatus by waiters and waitresses garbed in surgical masks and gowns. The guests are offered masks and rubber gloves as their dinner attire, while they listen to tapes of heartbeats and discordant sounds. Inserted in a fantastic context, the quotidian behaviors of eating and offering food, shift their meanings from sustenance and routine to slaughter, incision, dismemberment, and sacrifice. The use of food in *Ritual Meal* finds a disturbing echo in Laurel Klick's *Suicide* (1972), in which Klick slashes her wrists and drenches her torso with red paint, turning her body into a sacrificial sight and her death into a meal to be devoured by a group of men (played by women) who make callous comments on her suicide. The techniques of displacement in Smith's piece and sardonic hyperbole in Klick's point to their redressive functions, which render ordinary aspects of women's lives extraordinary, ambiguous, hence worthy of dramatization and invested observations.

To bring into performative visibility hitherto unmarked sights is the impulse behind many redressive/feminist performances. This impulse is primarily redemptive, with the pleasure of transgression an added bonus. Thus, many pieces deliberately challenge decorum, taboo, and the moral order of the day to bring forbidden subjects to light. They excavate the mysteries of birth, menstruation, procreation, female sexualities, aging, and dying, so as to remove the perceived stigmas from these psychobiological, and often genderspecific, experiences. Some of these pieces are extremely private, self-oriented, verging on confessions. They redress personal traumas and phobias, turning the individual artist/subject into an emblematic figure, an every woman.

Rachel Rosenthal's *The Death Show* (1978) exemplifies the type of autobiographical performances that have become especially associated with feminist art (fig. 3). Accompanied by a ticking metronome, Rosenthal reminisces about her initiation into various types of dying from the death of her pets: a teddy bear from childhood, a kitten born defective, and a beloved cat who said “*au revoir*” to her before it died. She mimes the lurking of a “thousand deaths” that she has experienced by using a sharp knife to slice off the fingers of her black gloves one by one, exposing her blood-red nails. The ritual leads to the unveiling of the “Icon of the Fat Vampire,” represented by an old photograph of
herself displayed on an easel. The artist hits her body incessantly while describing how she killed off her old undesirable self. The piece concludes with a ceremony called “Stations of the Fat Vampire,” in which Rosenthal repeats nine times the ritual of recalling a cataclysmic life event, eating some sweet food compulsively, and placing a candle on a replica photo of the Fat Vampire. The ceremony closes with Rosenthal’s contorted face emitting a silent scream, recalling the actress Helene Weigel’s contained agony as Mother Courage screaming silently in Bertolt Brecht’s *Mother Courage and Her Children*. Courage and determination, this analogy implies, are what one needs to exorcise one’s fear of death or to accept its positive values.

Another provocative feminist artist who has mobilized autobiography as a propelling force in her performances is Eleanor Antin, who was a colleague of Kaprow’s at UCSD and performed at the Woman’s Building and LACE. Antin pushes the concept of autobiography beyond a record of a self made through time, into a mobile zone of possibilities where a self can be remade. In a series of performance quests from 1972 to 1986, Antin explored a set of personas that both crystallized and expanded her malleable self. These personas included the King, the Black Movie Star, the Ballerina, the Nurse, and, most elaborately, Eleanora Antinova, a fictional black ballerina from Sergei Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes. In her earliest lifelike performances as the King (beginning in 1972), Antin puts on “a false beard, a grand chapeau, a velvet cape, and leather boots over denim jeans” and strolls around Solana Beach (in northern San Diego County) to converse with unsuspecting passers-by as subjects in his kingdom. While Antin adopts masculine signs (the beard, the kingly garments) and a regal attitude as the King of Solana Beach, she does not fully alter or disguise her feminine-marked figure—in one of her portraits as the King (fig. 4), her cleavage is tantalizingly visible. Her impersonation plays with the juxtaposition of a residual self (traces as female) and an other...
self (the King) as a histrionic add-on. This juxtaposition visually mocks the limits of a
gendered self, undermining its socially assumed fixity to turn it into a playful performance.
Most intriguingly, Antin carries on her transformation without erasing her own personal
identity as a Jewish woman. Thus, her performance of autobiographical fictions stands as one
of the earliest feminist works to investigate the intersection of gender and ethnicity.[100]

At the other end of the spectrum from self-oriented work is a type of redressive performance
that decries the violence of rape, incest, sexist conditioning, and social oppression. *Ablutions*
(1972), a collective piece by Judy Chicago, Suzanne Lacy, Sandy Orgel, and Aviva Rahmani,
includes a duet and some solo actions: a woman methodically winds gauze around a sitting,
naked female; a woman nails beef kidneys on the rear wall; two other naked women bathe
themselves in tubs containing eggs, blood, and clay.[101]

![Eleanor Antin as “The King,” 1972.](image)

*Broken*
egg shells litter the ground. A tape plays women's testimonies about being raped—“I felt so helpless all I could do was lie there and cry”[102]—while two clothed women bind the set and performers together with ropes (fig. 5). In this powerful piece different women are united by their joined protest against victimization. The raw beef kidneys, the soiled female bodies, the cocooned figure, and the final tableau of immobility all condemn the patriarchal society's abusive sexism—the viciousness of rape.

These redressive performances with a gynocentric ethos exercise a feminist revision of the established, masculinist culture's definitions of aesthetic veracity and criteria. Some women artists have attempted an alternative method of artistic creation through collaboration and collective works, trading the glory of single authorship for the political and spiritual efficacy of coalition. Characteristically, their strategies include both defensive measures and offensive tactics, mixing redressive with generative functions in performance.

On the defensive side, these women artists search inward, into their private lives. Following the feminist axiom “the personal is the political,” these artists seize upon the political power of personal expressions to advocate their interest. Through introspection they reclaim their bodies from patriarchal pos

session by articulating women's physiological particularities. They draw on autobiographical details to divulge and to individualize their experiences. They also probe the dialectics between biology and social constructions of gender to uncover the ideological determinants within the formation of individual, sexual, and social identities.

On the offensive side, they expose the arbitrariness of traditional values that universalize “male genius” at the expense of women artists. Against the dominant decree of objectivity, feminist artists intervene with performances that foreground their subjective viewpoints and emotional investment. Against the Kantian claim for the disinterested nature of art, feminist performances unveil the masculocentric complicity within such a claim. The artists protest the psychic and physical violence done to women's bodies by enlisting their own bodies performatively as contested sites where nature and culture meet. Being other subjects, these artists take performance as a public cultural forum through which to empower themselves, to question their persistent marginalization, and to make their own histories happen.
Redressive Performances and Multiculturalism

Both Kaprow's nonart stance and feminist artists' proactive stance succeeded in broadening the boundary of art, even if they did not overturn the hegemonic systems. Their diverse theories and practices evinced alternative conceptions of art. In their work, art is education, advocacy, social critique, cultural service, existential contemplation, spiritual discipline, emotional engagement, psychosomatic healing, activism, guerrilla resistance, and affirmation for the self as well as empowerment for others.

These new equations were the redressive messages transmitting from the performance medium by the early 1980s, when L.A. was fast changing into a megalopolis populated by other subjects. During the next two decades the city witnessed a host of predicaments: the widening gap between the rich and the poor; the worsening of the AIDS epidemic; an increasing drug problem; a high rate of illegal immigration; de facto segregation of different racial/ethnic groups, especially through the class line; disintegration of the social commonwealth during the materialistic 1980s; and economic recession in the early 1990s. The heteropolis suddenly sensed the burden of its precarious multicentricity. On the one hand, persistent crises became more pronounced: racism, sexism, ageism, ableism, classism, homophobia, xenophobia, and other prejudices—all pointing to intolerance for people because of their otherness, variously embodied in their physiological peculiarities, sexual orientation, health, immigration, or economic status. On the other hand, L.A. launched a quest for redressive strategies to deal with these crises, if only to salvage the city's image.

In response to the city's quest to improve its sociocultural conditions, an ironic coalition occurred in L.A. around the mid-1980s among corporate developers, government and academic institutions, the mass media, and freelance performance artists. “Multiculturalism” emerged as both the cause and effect of this contingent coalition, producing an answer to the city's redressive quest. By fluke or by fate, multiculturalism became the newly minted ideological currency in which disparate constituencies invested their trust, cash, euphoria, discourses, and performances. Multiculturalism appeared to be the latest panacea to all social problems, the buzzword for granters and employers, and an overnight cause célèbre that promised a brighter rainbow future for this bulging citadel poised between Latin America, the Pacific Ocean, and the Bible Belt over the hills. Always already multicentric, L.A. found an ideological twin for its multicentricity: multiculturalism.

REDRESSIVE PERFORMANCES BY AND FOR OTHER SUBJECTS

The collusion of divergent forces and predicaments in L.A., intensified by the rage of multiculturalism, produced a cultural climate conducive to redressive performance. Although multiculturalism itself would soon be put under public scrutiny and academic unraveling—as all trend-setting movements are—redressive performance would endure as a ubiquitous genre during the 1980s and early 1990s. Redressive performance came forth as the emergency aid to the social ills that troubled L.A., for it offered countermeasures against the erosion of public conscience. In its highly adaptable formats, redressive performance was a uniquely suitable means for artists to conduct a subliminal or activist cultural campaign for tolerance. The genre supplied a seemingly ideal vehicle for multicultural expressions, thanks to its affinity to other subjects, its sympathy toward repressed values, and its ability to draw together a community of spectators and participants.
With the rise of multicultural consciousness, many artists who considered themselves other subjects—ethnic minority artists, gay and lesbian artists, artists with physical disabilities, immigrant artists, artists from alternative lifestyles, artists with proactive social visions and programs—adopted redressive performance as their medium of choice. Like feminist artists in the previous decade, these emerging artists used performance to explore issues concerning personal identities, politics of representation, and cultural in/visibility. Their redressive performances attacked social mores, engaged in grassroots activism, and affirmed their own disenfranchised communities. In their manifest configurations, redressive performances became thoroughly multicentric. The dilemma of being an/other in a city filled with other subjects was a central paradox treated by new strains of redressive performance. These works made by and for other subjects have greatly complicated the connotations of being an/other in a multicentric habitat such as L.A.

Recent strains of redressive performance follow the expanded conceptions of art as pedagogy, resistance, activism, healing, self-determination, and community building. At their best, these performances pursue numerous possibilities in tandem with a strong version of multiculturalism: to acknowledge the pertinence of race, to accept the irreducible presence of difference/otherness, and to encourage the representation of diversity. At their most simplistic, redressive performances ostensibly invert but practically duplicate the dualistic structure of the current hegemony, posing the uniformly perverse oppressors, who usually represent a single sex/race/class matrix, against the uniformly victimized others. While performances that adopt such a polemical approach may serve to expose social injustice, they often fail to recognize the contradictions and heterogeneity within any single constituency, or to challenge the pernicious reasoning behind entrenched social hierarchy. Consequently these performances obscure the interactive dynamics at work among diverse groups within a multiracial/ethnic nation such as the United States and forfeit the opportunities for serious self-critiques directed toward the subjugated individuals and communities. In the worst scenarios, redressive performances are reduced to superficial propaganda for a given ideological cause (be it nonartism, feminism, multiculturalism, egalitarianism, separatism, or holism and environmentalism) without substantial inquiry into the cause and its relation to other causes. In these cases, redressive performance, instead of being a liberating force, becomes a confining simulacrum of its own illconceived teleology.

The Generative Function

At least two levels are involved in the generative function of performance in L.A. On the internal level, the function deals with the medium's intrinsic aesthetic properties rather than its extrinsic efficacy. Performance's generative function in this context contrasts with the redressive function. Art performance, a live art genre imbued with an exclusive interest in its own medium, characteristically makes no attempt to connect with the surrounding environment of L.A. On the external level, however, performance's generative function complements the redressive function to alter the cultural environment of L.A. I use the generative function in this expanded context to signify performance's ability to generate an alternative theater culture in L.A.

Art Performance and Place

Framed within a self-referential context, performance's generative function concerns the medium's intrinsic aesthetic properties and their abilities to engender
new performance works. It indicates performance's proclivity to revert back to its medium as a singular creative source. Among the three functions—reflective, redressive, and generative—this last function is the most common attribute that performance shares with other artistic mediums. The generative function may then be considered the least region-specific. Whereas the reflective and redressive functions ground performance in the geo-sociocultural context of L.A., performance's intrinsic generative function relates to the place of its production only in a tangential or incidental manner.

By stating that the place has little bearing on the generative function intrinsic to performance, I do not deny the subliminal influence that a place exerts on artists and their activities. Indeed, even the most “objective” factors of a place—say the climate, sunshine, earthquake threat, traffic, architecture, and ecology of L.A.—affect an artist's lived reality and thus her/his imaginary outputs. Besides, “the place” may be chosen by the artist as subject matter, a theme, or a character in a performance. I distinguish, however, between L.A. as a performative representation and L.A. as the surrounding environment. Should L.A. become thematized in a piece, I hold that the performance is about L.A., rather than necessarily of L.A. A performance about L.A. doesn't have to happen in L.A.; it can be conceived and produced anywhere. A performance of L.A., conversely, cannot exist the way it does without the particular L.A. that has inspired and produced it at a given time/space axis. A performance of L.A. may happen in L.A., or it may travel to other regions and countries as L.A. art. Given that all the performances treated here are fundamentally of L.A., I underestimate the import of L.A. in my present analysis only to emphasize art performance's individualistic, relatively autonomous, and self-referential qualities.

The generative function intrinsic to art performance has less to do with the external than the internal environment wherein the art-making takes place. Art performance gains momentum from the innate condition of the performance medium; the medium, however, encompasses simultaneously the artist, the method, and the formal contents (message), featuring a triangular zone of fluid interactions. The artists distill their methods from interacting with the medium, thereby creating the “internal environments” for their artmaking. On the whole, art performance practitioners generate new works after intensive studies of the medium's aesthetic/conceptual properties and limits. They immerse themselves in a gestating process whereby they gain a command of the medium through practice, a keen examination of other performances, and an awareness of the conventions, fashions, and innovations within the art world. The artists working in the vein of art performance usually have already achieved a certain level of technical expertise prior to the performance.

The generative function is tied in with performance's status as art art, rather than nonart—to borrow Kaprow's idioms. The artists regard their performances as art-making. They do not question the meaning of making art; instead, they demonstrate their conviction in art—whatever meaning it has—by persisting in creating performances. I call this type of work art performance to distinguish it from redressive performance. Redressive performance finds its raison d'être in exceeding its own status as a mere performance. Art performance, in contrast, believes that the purpose of performance resides within itself. The laborious process of conceiving, preparing for, and rehearsing an art performance finds its validation and reward in the eventual sharing of its enactment with an audience. In this sense, art performance, among all performance genres, most approximates theater art.
Art Performance and Theater

It is useful at this juncture to recall my earlier definition for performance art as an intermedia visual art form that uses theatrical elements in its presentation. Art performance takes an acute interest in those theatrical elements—time, space, action, performer, spectator—as the problems and materials posed by each project.

My choice of the term “theatrical” inevitably evokes one of the thorniest issues in theorizing about performance in earlier decades: the relation between performance art and theater. This somewhat pedantic issue has troubled performance artists, art historians, and theater commentators alike, especially those who practice in New York City (because it is an active theater town) and in L.A. (because it is an active movie town without a strong experimental theater tradition). The L.A. producer Scott Kelman, for example, once organized a symposium entitled “Theater or Performance, What's the Difference?” He set up a debate, with four people on either side, representing theater and performance art. For Kelman, the answer to his question was “Who cares.” He never expected a conflict in which the participants accused him of spawning a hostile environment. Kelman's experience suggests the intense controversy over the issue under debate, even though the issue itself centers on the naming of categories in theory rather than the exigencies and hybridity of mixed-media practices, which both theater and performance art are. Since I argue that art performance approximates theater art, a revisiting of this contentious issue is in order.

Suspicion against Theatricality

Linda Burnham began a 1979 essay on performance art with a disclaimer: “There are no performance artists in Southern California. There are some 30 individuals consistently using live action in artworks, but in interviews with them I found that none of them wished to be categorized as a ‘performance artist.’ Almost unanimously, they wish to be seen as ‘artists,’ that is creators of visual images arising out of the context of art history.”[105] There are of course many different reasons for visual artists' reservations about the term “performance art.” The most important reason is the term's association with theater. As Marvin Carlson observes, to most visual artists who practiced live actions in the 1970s, “theatre was the most common ‘other’ against which” their own work could be defined.[106] I see three predominant reasons for visual artists' antitheatrical tendencies: theater's tie with entertainment, theater's status as art, and theater's espousal of simulation.

According to Kristine Stiles, many early visual artists “vehemently rejected the term performance art” because it “inappropriately connotes theater, not visual art.”[107] To them “theater” means “entertainment,” which is farthest away from their goals as visual art practitioners. Some other artists, like Kaprow, use live actions to stress a ceaseless existential state, an art/life continuum that denounces the reification of art into a sacred zone of specialized activities. They may not oppose to the idea of entertainment per se, yet these un-artists resist calling their performance activities “theater” because theater signifies an intentional artistic frame and a materialized action displayed in front of a live audience. To them, such signification is confining, for their performance can just as well be nonartistic, lifelike, thought of and carried out only in the artist's head without being witnessed by any live viewer other than the artist's own consciousness.[108] The third group of artists dissociate their work from theater because of theater's conceptual proximity to pretense, fantasy, make-believe, illusion, and simulation. Chris Burden, who was, with Kaprow, one of the most
celebrated Southern California action artists in the 1970s, has claimed that his body art projects were real-time live events distinct from the “more mushy” world of theater. “It seems that bad art is theatre,” said Burden in a 1973 interview, “Getting shot is for real… there is no element of pretense or make-believe in it.”

In my opinion, these antitheatrical tendencies all pivot on certain restricted definitions for theater as a style and a cultural institution. Only Kaprow's nonart stance has achieved a degree of theoretical sophistication, because it rejects theater on the basis of a wholesale skepticism against all art arts. The other two tendencies—seeing theater as entertainment or as simulation—both privilege visual art over theater only to betray their own high-art snobbery. Such high-art snobbery is so ingrained in the visual art world that Timothy Martin, in his catalog essay on L.A. performance for Sunshine and Noir, justifies featuring Chris Burden, Mike Kelley, and Paul McCarthy by stating that “they had the good sense to stop performing.” I see the two tendencies, united by their similar suspicion against theater, as different inflections of the traditional “antitheatrical prejudice” historicized by Jonas Barish.

THEATER'S STATUS AS ART

Kaprow's nonart stance exemplifies the attitude typical of many redressive performance practitioners. Although most redressive performances incorporate an essential component of theater—the audience—the artists not only shun the use of traditional theater spaces but also avoid theatricality as a performance style. “Theatricality” here is understood restrictively as technical proficiency, fantastic fabrication, character transformation, and representational illusionism. Many redressive performances deliberately employ incompetence as a political or conceptual gesture. Instead of well-scripted and meticulously rehearsed presentational polish, redressive performance stresses real-time, task-oriented, ephemeral events. Insofar as a theater piece can be considered a more complete product than a redressive performance, theatricality is indeed a value traditionally associated with art, hence subject to critique by redressive performance. These nontheater (un)artists distinguish their work from theater as part of their dispute with the art world's fixation on professional expertise, which ensures a predictable level of aesthetic aptitude and consistency. By problematizing those received professional values and standards, redressive performance manages to open up the performance medium as an expressive mode for amateurs, nonartists, un-artists, as well as artists not trained in either visual art or theater.

THEATER'S TIE WITH ENTERTAINMENT

The equation between theater and entertainment is partial, if not arbitrary. Richard Schechner, in Performance Theory, posits efficacy and entertainment as the two poles of a continuum of intentionality for all performance activities, which he further classifies into five general types: aesthetic theater, sacred ritual, secular ritual, sports, and social drama. Schechner offers a prodigious “Performance Time/Space/Event Chart,” subsuming both Happenings and performance art under the category of “aesthetic theater.” Schechner also argues that “[no] performance is pure efficacy and pure entertainment.” While Schechner's classification may be debatable, I believe his argument convincingly establishes the fallacy of linking theater solely with entertainment and exposes the puritanism of denying any hint of entertainment in performance art.
The prejudice against entertainment is often unexamined. In *Presence and Resistance*, Philip Auslander cautions against the anti-entertainment bias as an avant-garde reflex that should be questioned in our late-capitalist society of mass-media saturation and professional crossovers. 

Heeding Auslander's warning, I argue that entertainment is not necessarily an illegitimate cause for art-making, nor does it always compromise the quality of art. Granted that entertainment providers often develop a complicitous relationship with the mainstream cultural establishment, such complicity is by no means an absolute condition for aesthetic compromise or political inanity. Auslander's analysis strikes a chord in a city like L.A., dominated as it is by the economic and cultural presence of the movie, TV, and music industries. Within the local context, to oppose performance to theater/entertainment is to erase the nuances of ambivalence, codependency, and cross-pollination that exist between a marginal art practice and the hegemonic mainstream. In fact, even this dichotomized conception between performance and the so-called mainstream culture has to be challenged. As Auslander asks, echoing the questions raised by many other scholars on popular and mass culture, “What is the limit past which marginality gives way to marketability?”

Concurring with Auslander, I hold that contemporary performance is neither inherently incompatible with the commodification procedure, nor antipodal to entertainment, understood as a relaxation of judgment for sensorial gratification. Some art performances, which are fast becoming the trend in turn-of-millennium L.A., are as entertaining as a commercial theater project or a blockbuster movie. Conversely, some mainstream theater works and art movies are abstruse, politically poignant, and ideologically anti-entertainment. The distinctions among these disparate cultural/aesthetic modes no longer lie in their intentions, nor in their styles and subject matter, but in their budgets, their systems of distribution, and their habitual clientele.

THEATER'S ESPOUSAL OF SIMULATION

The link between theater and simulation is undeniable, yet the judgment against theater/simulation is often unreflected and self-righteous. Such judgment is corroborated by an inherited moral habit that believes in an absolute dichotomy between honesty and lie, fact and fiction, truth and falsehood, designating superior social values to the former entities. I urge that we fine-tune this inherited dichotomy, for although its clear-cut system of binarism is, for certain purposes, necessary, it is, in essence, arbitrary. As a legal necessity, the dichotomy has to be assumed by general consent. As a belief system, however, the dichotomy is just as artificial and mediated by human will as any other belief system. In our daily existence we are obliged to follow the order of this legalized belief system and to presume the virtues of honesty, fact, and truth. Theater gives us an antidote to this routine belief by being an art form that operates in another belief system: *it truthfully confesses its own untruth.*

Herbert Blau describes theater as “a moving fiction, a lie like truth, a mere cast of thought.” He beautifully captures the paradoxical nature of theater's belief system: “What is there is not there. What is there is an evanescence, an escapement, a slippery clockwork. The theater is the most *time-serving* of forms, literally, functionally, and metaphysically. It is by nature unreliable…. All its strategies are deceptions…. its power is the power of a thoroughly laminated illusion.”
Victor Turner expands Blau's analysis to focus on theater as a simulacrum of good faith. What I noted as theater's belief system follows the logic described by Turner as “the subjunctive mood of a verb,” used to “express supposition, desire, hypothesis, or possibility, rather than stating actual facts.”[116] Let me reiterate both Blau's and Turner's observations: Theater is a living artifact that thrives on the premise of “as if,” presenting in all sincerity the perceptual framing of an embodied illusion. The theatrical illusion is simultaneously a transformed reality and a disappearing presence that resembles, evokes, intimates, defers, or temporarily substitutes an absent world—be it the world of the historical past, the unverifiable psyche, the reassembled fantasies, or the current events outside the theater proper.

Blau's “laminated illusion” and Turner's “subjunctive mood” echo Antonin Artaud's famous analogy for theater: the double.[117] The “double” is a notion formally associated with sorcery. A double is a spectral duplicate, an alchemical substitute, and a phantasmic parallel of the perceptual “real,” which is supposedly the double's material origin and counterpart. The double ranks in the order of simulacrum, dream, magic, illusion, metaphor, and shadow; it inhabits the world inside the mirror; it is a conspicuous copy of the Platonic ideal, flamboyantly defying Plato's moral hierarchy. Theater is par excellence a medium of the double, which conflates two extreme qualities: that of mirage and that of corporeality. A place to see, hear, sense, and partake of the play of doubles, theater allocates a special, agreed-upon time to celebrate the symbolic and actual congregation of the players' and spectators' imagination. Theater is therefore a belief system that recognizes the virtues of ambiguity, of imaginary and visceral exchange, and of the heavy matter-ness and the essential ephemerality of human embodiment.

If I've established so far that theater is a belief system devoted to projecting concrete phantoms, then I must agree with Chris Burden's accusation that theater is guilty of “pretense and make-believe.” Yet, I question, does this unabashed espousal of disguise necessarily make theater “bad art”? I have no intention to argue with Burden's personal opinion, which carries the authority of his own “body art” practice (a type of performance that takes the artist's body as the subject matter, source, and object of art). As mentioned earlier, Burden's career attained its high profile in the early 1970s as a fascinating sample of L.A. performances. His “bodyworks” continue to represent an extreme facet of L.A. art.[118]

Burden's disdain for theater, moreover, represents a typical attitude among many of his coeval visual art-based performance artists in L.A.

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**Chris Burden's Extreme Art Performance**

Within a short span of five years (1971–75), Burden produced a variety of live performances that can best be described as minimalist transgressions. All achieve a high degree of visual economy and conceptual provocability typical of “minimalist” aesthetics.[119] They also enlist Burden's own body as the primary art material, invariably pushing this body to the limits of endurance, pain, and danger, thereby transgressing the commonsensical rule against self-harm.

In *Contract with the Skin*, Kathy O'Dell uses the film theorist Deborah Linderman's notion of “limit-texts” in assessing Burden's “masochistic performance.” O'Dell's angle is insightful, considering that Burden's body art pieces, always on edge, are precisely “limit-texts,” which “quer[y] a boundary that is normatively repressed in other texts.”[120] I propose, however, to read Burden's performances not in the context of masochism but as limit-texts for art.
performance. In my view, Burden's work deals less with the erotic psychodynamic associated with masochism than with the intrinsic condition of the performance medium. I see Burden's body art as a type of extreme art performance, for his projects invest in the artistic potentials of those elements constitutive of the performance medium. His live performances evolve from reconsidering how to manipulate those intrinsic elements to the extreme, addressing them at their limits so as to express his own artistic subjectivity at its limit. By continually testing the boundary of these elements, Burden locates the generating force to create new limit-texts for art performance.

BURDEN'S F/ACTUAL PERFORMANCE

Stripped down to essentials, the intrinsic condition of performance emanates from the flexible matrix of time, space, action, performer, viewer—the very elements I call theatrical. Burden might, given his disdain for the “mushy” theater, object to my qualifying those elements as theatrical. Our difference at this point, however, is no more than a semantic issue, a question of naming and categorization. As such, it can neither deny the validity of my analysis nor change the nature of Burden's practice. It simply indicates that we have different assumptions about what “theater” means.

I take a more inclusive approach to theater, regarding theater as a multivalent signifier and site enlivened by an intentional engagement with the timespace-action-performer-viewer matrix. Burden's take on theater is restricted to the notion of simulation, with its implications of pretense, make-believe, fakery. This is the reason behind Burden's judgment of theater as a “bad art.” In order not to do “bad art,” I surmise, Burden stresses the actuality of experiential extremity endured by his body during performance as the essence and proof of his own “good art,” his antithesis to theater. “The proof of the pudding is in the eating,” so goes Burden's logic. The “real” body artist will not be satisfied with a “theatrical” treatment of a pudding-eating act if there is no actual pudding being swallowed and digested during performance. This fascination with actuality is recognized by many interpreters as the root of Burden's art. Paul Schimmel analyzes Burden's performances as direct and visceral treatments of “facts.” Howard Singerman views Burden's body art projects as private quests for “experience and knowledge,” linking Burden's attitude to “pragmatism.”[12] From my vantage point, I submit that Burden's f/actual performances are deliberate antitheatrical art performances, because they quote from theater specifically to implode the theatrical illusion.

LIMIT-TEXTS FOR ART PERFORMANCE

Increasing extreme performances, Burden's objectives might include any combination of the following: to pursue innovation, experiential knowledge, and self-transcendence; to demonstrate his courage, machismo, witticism, and dedication; to compose sensational visual images; to construct the mystique of an extraordinary artistic persona. His means of achieving these objectives, however, involves a recurrent confrontation with the basic elements of performance, stretching each to its (antitheatrical) extreme.

In Bed Piece (1972) Burden sleeps in a single bed placed inside a gallery for the duration of the entire exhibition (February 18 to March 10). He does not speak to anyone during the performance. The curator Josh Young, on his own initiative, provides food, water, and toilet facilities for the sleeping artist. The time for this endurance performance lasts twenty-two days. The space is framed by the boundary of the gallery, and the bed becomes the stage
entirely occupied by a performing body. The action involves the artist/performer sleeping, encompassing the invisible scenario of his dreams and meditations and the biological drama of his sweat, stench, snores, and other metabolic effects. Most viewers experience or imagine the impact of this performance through the photograph documenting the action.

In a contrasting piece, *Doorway to Heaven* (1973), Burden pushes two live electric wires into his chest, while a few spectators watch the action taking place in the doorway of his Venice studio. The wires cross and explode, burning the artist, yet saving him from electrocution. A magnificent pyrotechnic image from this performance itself becomes a displayable art product. In this piece the time for the simple physical action lasts only a few minutes, yielding an instantaneous climax and an actual wound borne by the artist/performer. The performance happens in a semi-open space, witnessed by a few invited and random viewers.

These two pieces exemplify the general aesthetics and ethos of Burden's art performances. They utilize the same structural and presentational elements as theater, yet they also modify, even distort, those elements to such an extent that they are no longer theatrical, but merely composed and f/actual. Most distinctly, the performer throughout these divergent pieces never assumes any character other than that of the artist himself. These attributes all point to the distinctions between Burden's art performance and a regular theater work.

I suggest that the most striking distinction between Burden's work and theater lies in his habit as a visual artist of producing displayable artworks out of live performances. All of Burden's performances are accompanied by a formulaic method of documentation—a set of exhibits consisting of a catchall title; a photograph of the artist/performer in action; a text succinctly describing the time, the space, and the action score, plus records of audience reactions; and some props—called “relics” by Burden—left from the action. This schematic documentation can be exhibited long after the performance is over. A photograph from a theatrical performance can seldom be evaluated independently from the original production; it is appreciated more for its historical and documentary value than for its worth as an aesthetic object. A photograph from Burden's art performance, conversely, is designed as a performative artwork in and of itself; it is enriched by yet detachable from the original performance to become both a document and an aesthetic object.

**ACTUALITY IN PERFORMANCE AS A BELIEF SYSTEM**

Despite Burden's claims, actuality is not the key that distinguishes his body art from the “bad art” of theater. Although theater embraces the premise of pretense, the actors who embody fictitious characters have to actually experience the dramatic transformation of their live actions, as much as Burden the artist has to experience his own nondramatized persona through f/actual actions. Actuality exists both in theater and in art performance, albeit in different guises. As my analysis indicates, theater and performance art presuppose a different ontology for actuality. The actuality in a theatrical performance is intended to be shared by performers and spectators together in a designated time and space. Theatrical actuality arises from a social communion among consenting bodies. The actuality in Burden's art performance, however, is primarily experienced by the artist himself, with or without the participation of a live audience. Hence, this important distinction: whereas a theatrical production has to be experienced and witnessed live for it to be theater, Burden's art performance can be experienced conceptually as a legend. Burden himself has realized as
much in commenting on the conceptual nature of his bodyworks: “the very instant the work is made … it starts to become a myth.”[122]

Despite this difference, I find Burden's evaluation of theater as “bad art” self-serving, because it fails to acknowledge the similarities between his work and theater. Burden's antitheatrical f/actual performance resembles theater in that it also operates as a self-referential belief system: it truthfully declares its own actuality on the level of the artist's personal experience. Although Burden might believe otherwise, his body's actual experience of endurance, pain, and risk can never be physically ascertained by an other. Even for those who witness his action live, the affect of Burden's f/actual performance is still mediated to some extent by the viewers' suspension of disbelief (as if that affect were provoked by a theatrical illusion). Burden himself seems to be aware of the belief system at work in his f/actual performances; he has even turned that belief system into the subject matter of a piece, *White Light/White Heat* (1975; fig. 6).

In between the ceiling and floor of the Ronald Feldman Gallery, a triangular platform is constructed according to the artist's specification, allowing him to lie flat without being visible from any angle in the gallery. For twentytwo days, Burden lies flat, fasts, and remains silent on top of the platform without being witnessed by any viewer. The truthfulness of the action is declared by the routine set of documentation prepared by the artist, but it cannot be empirically verified by others. Faith, as a currency exchanged in a belief system, is the emotional task required of both the artist and his visitors to experience *White Light/White Heat*.

Burden's bodyworks established a strong precedent for art performance in L.A. Of course, it is impossible to know whether Burden would have done similar types of performances had he resided in any other part of the world. History tells us that contemporaneous bodyworks were created in New York City, Europe, and Japan. Since Burden's extreme body acts address the archetypal theme of human embodiment as it intersects with performance's intrinsic components, they have only a coincidental relationship with L.A. This recalls my thesis that art performance, the genre corresponding to performance's intrinsic generative function, is individualistic and self-referential rather than region-specific. The documented existence of Burden's extreme body acts in L.A.'s performance history, nevertheless, adds to the frontier mystique of this coastal metropolis, illustrating an aspect of its fringe sensibilities. The generative function of performance has spurred Burden to engender unique art performances; it has also enriched the performance cultures of L.A.

**The Making of a Performance/Theater Fringe**

Burden's ambivalence toward theater ironically points to the external effect triggered by performance's generative function: its fortuitous impact on L.A.'s
performing arts, stimulating the emergence of an alternative theater culture. As I have already indicated, both theater and performance art are signifying systems of multiple aesthetic and conceptual postulations, serving multiple cultural functions. Since neither theater nor performance art is a homogeneous entity, their relations are both complex and variable. They may change from opposition to mutual emulation at various moments. Three examples must suffice here. Taken as a long-standing cultural institution, theater is a target of redressive performance, which seeks to subvert all established aesthetic orders. Taken as an intermedia art form that utilizes a presentational structure among live human bodies, theater bears a close resemblance to art performance. Taken as a team project that divides labor among hierarchical personnel, theater can learn and has learned much from the relative autonomy, economy, and spontaneity of individual agency embodied by performance art. This last relationship has special resonance in L.A.

By citing performance as a model for theater, I wish to acknowledge performance's contribution to the art/culture/entertainment ecosystem of L.A. Before the 1980s L.A. was known as an entrepreneurial port for mass entertainment without an experimental or avant-garde tradition in the performing arts. The Olympic Arts Festival in 1984 was for most Angeleno/as the first exposure to the experimental theater work imported from New York and Europe. “That kind of work had to be done in Los Angeles by performance artists,” noted Burnham in 1986.[123] Her remark registers that performance art was, at least till the mid-1980s, the experimental/avant-garde fringe in L.A.

This avant-garde fringe was first established and occupied by visual artists in the 1970s. Most of these artists, like Kaprow and Burden, guarded their work against any suspicion of
“theatricality.” Rachel Rosenthal, for instance, has complained that she was not accepted by most peers because her work was theatrical: “It's only after many years of practicing performance that performance artists became more and more theatrical themselves, and so now I don't stick out as much as I did in the beginning.”[124] Ironically Rosenthal emerged as one of the most influential teachers of performance art in the 1980s. Her Dbd workshops were taken by visual and nonvisual artists alike. Rosenthal's experience reflects the shift within performance art after the 1970s that I noted earlier. By the end of the 1980s performance art had departed from its visual art lineage and revised its initial antitheatrical interdiction to become a methodology open to multicentric experiments.

Two factors converged amid the cultural boom of the 1980s to make performance a particularly user-friendly medium in L.A. First, the presence of a local audience in tune with 1970s performances encouraged new experimental activities. Second, the structural proximity of performance to theater enticed the participation of many theater-or media-trained actors. The result was a gradual blurring of distinctions between performance art and experimental theater during the last two decades of the twentieth century, facilitating the rise of an alternative theater culture in L.A.

Burnham offers the insight that performance art was actually “an audience,” a group of self-selected individuals who were more “tolerant, informed, and adventurous” than the conventional theater or movie-going public in L.A.[125] How did this performance art audience train itself? Onsite, according to Burnham. More than other paying customers, the performance art audience was willing to join the artists in “risk taking”—since there was no telling of what would transpire during a performance. This audience's prepared lack of expectation in turn licensed the artists to show novel, hermetic, repulsive, half-baked, or committed performances. By the 1990s the permissive atmosphere helped inspire such a diverse range of live events that performance art became synonymous with experimentation, accessibility, eclecticism, and volatility. Put another way, performance art has generated a field of experimental art in L.A. precisely because it permits free play, conceptual exploration, autobiographical introspection, and social engagement.

The development of performance art in L.A. soon affected the world of performing arts. As Burnham observes, when performance art became hot currency in 1980s art/culture/entertainment circles, theater groups and producers began to ally themselves with this live art medium for the purpose of acquiring its audience, sponsors, funding sources, publicity outlets, and cultural visibility.[126] The surge of interest in performance experiments and the availability of presenting venues in turn attracted artists trained in the performing arts, especially actors who floated in between dreams of stardom and a life drifting from unrequited auditions to transient employment.

For actors, performance art promises a self-determined career. Since performance art has incorporated theatrical elements, it is not impossible for actors to acquire a performance dialect out of their own live art training. The creative autonomy exercised by performance artists as independent authors/researchers/presenters offers an alternative to the chain of command in the conventional movie and theater worlds. Actors are inspired to self-produce their self-scripted solo performances, taking initiative in designing their professional paths. Through artist fees and touring opportunities, performance provides actors a means of quick exposure and economic survival—however minimal—while allowing them to continually hone their skills. Most important, performance art motivates actors to generate new works for
the perceived freedom, power, and value of individual imagination and self agency projected during performance.

As the constitution of its practitioners has changed, so has the art form. Actors' entrance into L.A. performance art has added a strong theatrical accent to performance art, refashioning it as an alternative theater culture.

**Beyond the Generative Principle**

The generative function of performance, on both the intrinsic and the extrinsic levels, has moved the genre from its initial visual art center toward multiple other centers, theater being one of them. This centrifugal trajectory in the performance medium mimes the broader developmental patterns in L.A. The diverse field of performance therefore presents a facet of multicentric LA. Performance art resembles L.A. to connote an existing hybrid space where individuals of multicentric persuasions can claim their residency and issue their syncretic products, ever redrawing the borderlines of this evolving territory.

My narrative about performance's generative function reflects the perspective of a theater critic who welcomes the creative possibilities performance art offers to theater. To be sure, someone from a visual art perspective may regard the transmuted field of performance art as a conceptual mayhem and feel disenchanted, agitated, and demoralized by the changes. Tome, however, such a defensive mood inadvertently echoes the sentiments that some Angeleno/as have expressed about immigration. Performance appears as a microcosmic refractor of L.A. cultures even in this respect.

For whatever reason, theater artists' and other creative personalities' migrating into the liberal territory of performance art has coincided with many visual artists moving away from this live art medium and resettling in other areas. Kaprow, for instance, has transferred his energy to teaching and to nonpublicized lifelike rituals. Burden has returned to sculpture and installation from his extreme body acts, leaving his notoriety/celebrity dangling in public memories as just another California myth. Other “old settlers,” including both artists and critics who first practiced and promulgated the performance medium, have been more vocal in their resistance. They seem unwilling to forsake their perceived proprietary right to naming performance art and regard the present field as a Babelian spectacle of morbid proliferation. Emblematic of this distress over the loss of the “original” performance art is a 1994 *High Performance* article entitled “Performance Art Is Dead/Long Live Performance Art” by Jacki Apple, a visual/performance artist and critic. Reviewing Apple's article suffices to note the change within performance art and the resulting tensions in the L.A. art world.

Apple's polemic opens with a declaration that performance art “seems to have disappeared into a fault line in the cultural terrain, swallowed up by theater and entertainment on one side, and the commodity driven art world on the other.” Inside the fault line, she sees performance art as absorbed by confessional texts and “splintered by the politics of culture (both multi and money).” Thus, sweepingly, Apple targets several supposed beneficiaries and opponents of performance art: theater, the entertainment industry, the capitalist art market, the self-oriented narratives, and multiculturalism. Her apocalypse-tinged analysis soon singles out theater as a usurper, “where actors and actresses who write their own material perform solo skits under the misnomer of ‘performance art.’” Apple judges that these theater artists have misappropriated performance art:
How ironic that a visual art form that initially positioned itself as anti-theatrical, and later was accused of being “bad theater,” should end up more often than not being bad theater made by performing, not visual artists. The new performance artists know little, if anything, of performance art's history, formal vocabulary or syntax. The fact that performance art's Achilles heel was always bad writing makes it yet another irony that it should have turned into a writer's medium relocated in the theater… in the conservative one-person show, one act play formats of conventional theater. Now it's the mannered acting that makes us wince.\[128\]

This passage, albeit from an antithetical standpoint, confirms my argument that performance art has mutated from its visual art origin to its present theater affiliation. Yet I have reservations about the antitheatrical inflections in Apple's comment, especially her implication that the one-person show is inferior because it duplicates conventional theater. In my view, conventional theater is not necessarily inferior; besides, many actor-created solo performances square with the autobiographical strain of feminist/redressive performance. Instead of being an ironic degeneration, as Apple would have it, solo performance can be seen as a recent genre developed within the performance art tradition. Apple's suspicion of text-based solo performance then reveals an antitheatrical elitism. Her allegation that “new performance artists” are ignorant of their chosen medium is likewise biased. Some of these artists may have entered this relatively young field precisely because it invites further experiments. If we consider that performance art has always thrived on hybridization and amorphousness, Apple's consternation regarding the changed field verges on territorial protectionism, if not xenophobia.

Like a besieged old-timer who mourns for the loss of precedence, Apple immerses her text in nostalgia for performance art's “visual art roots.” Her subtext seethes with the desire to conserve the turf for what she believes to be the true-blue performance art, described ingeniously—à la John Cage—as “a perceptual intervention.” Apple maintains that “traditionally the politics of performance art was covert rather than overt,” while reiterating performance art's identity as “a genre of work within the visual arts.” However legitimate her definition is, Apple inevitably delimits performance art according to her own preference and ideological investment, thereby reducing the genre's aesthetic, conceptual, and political possibilities. On behalf of feminist performance, for example, I would counter that the medium's radicality lies in making “the personal is the political” dictum overt. Apple's version of performance art suffers from unacknowledged reductionism.

Without exonerating myself from a similar reductive tendency, I wish to stress that performance art was already diverse and contradictory in its nascence. Further, performance art has changed to the extent that L.A. has changed. The newcomers to the “nation” of performance art are bound to redefine what constitutes the “nationhood” of performance art, much as the immigrants who are constantly becoming the constitutive elements of the multicentric L.A./U.S.A.

The Limit and Potential of Multicentricity

My version of performance genealogy in L.A. reflects the working of multicentricity as an epistemic principle, which informs my perspective in historicization and coordinates my map
for contemporary LA. Simultaneously shaped and conditioned by my own centricity, my version can never fully represent the performance genealogy in LA. In fact, it can hardly delineate in full what I know about LA performances. By the same token, my account cannot fully supersede others, nor can other accounts fully invalidate mine. Although I strive to offer the best within my present capacity, my work cannot stand alone as the authoritative text. Rather, it depends on other works that assess performance from multiple other perspectives to paint a more complete picture of the medium's presence in LA. This is not to suggest that all versions are equally sound, or to neutralize their differences and contradictions, and least of all to exempt any single account from critical scrutiny. On the contrary, the awareness of multicentricity allows me to espouse my own perceptual/conceptual centricity, even as it simultaneously obligates me to acknowledge the limits—both the blank center and the vivid circumference—of what constitutes my centricity. For the multiple other centers that coexist with mine will likely expose the deficiency of my centricity/subjectivity, even as they complement my lack.

Just as the paradigm of centricity in a multicentric universe is inherently (decentered and) fallible, the concept of multicentricity has its limit. The dilemma of multicentricity is predicated by the complex relations between subjective perceptions and material conditions. Multicentricity adheres to a relative value system, which is strong in asserting the interconnection between perception and materiality yet weak in resolving their discrepancy. Because of its relativity, multicentricity tends to suppress the validity and potential benefit of a more “absolute” value system. Moreover, this concept is powerless in dissolving the de facto hierarchy within a less than relative material world. This is why multicentricity cannot replace polarity in LA.

Multicentricity promotes the value of subjectivity by foregrounding the power of individual perceptions in forming a picture of material reality. Nevertheless, it cannot account for the fact that individual perceptions often derive from material basis beyond the individual's control. There is indeed an objective grounding to one's notion of reality, although one's notion of reality cannot unilaterally alter the objective grounding. Since I live in an implicitly color-coded world, I may wish to be white and even bleach my skin accordingly. But my very act of mimicry, which confirms the influence of external reigning values, ends up intensifying, rather than erasing, my irreducible difference from being white. The objective grounding, conversely, may shift over time through a nexus of causes including subjective intervention. I may aspire to be a dog, but my aspiration cannot turn me into a dog at this instant, as much as I bark like one. Yet I can choose to live like a dog and may eventually become indistinguishable from a dog, thereby altering the objective grounding of my humanhood.

My performance genealogy, being interpretation, is no more valid than Apple's version. Our different versions, however, describe similar patterns of transformation within performance art, thereby pointing to the existence of what I've called “objective grounding.” I may state that performance art is a broadenough territory to accommodate all practitioners, but my statement cannot increase the resources for those who must compete in the field. The “nation” of performance art may have a founding constitution elastic enough to welcome “immigrants,” but, up to a point, it must start contemplating both the meaning of its newly emergent “nationhood” and the aporia of psychological uncertainty and material scarcity resulting from its elastic constitution. I've argued for the need to reconceive performance art's multicentric nationhood. My argument is nevertheless unable to resolve the aporia inscribed
in this hybrid medium's founding constitution, which encourages the migration of self-motivated personalities into its rank, thereby securing the prospect of its own transmutation.

A melancholia of dislocation is adrift in a multicentric vision, for the multicentric subject can neither exercise absolute control over her/his own center nor possess firm knowledge about the multiple other centers that frame her/his lived reality. Besides, multicentricity cannot ensure universal euphoria, ration equivalent fulfillment, or manage available resources. The only certainty it affirms is the obligation of individual action and the necessity of self critique amid a teeming, slippery, and conflicting world.

Multicentricity is a proposal enacted by my exposé, an individual performance that declares its own power to change how we understand contemporary performances in L.A. Michel Foucault once mentioned that intellectuals can best contribute “instruments of analysis” to the world.\[^{[131]}\] I present multicentricity then as a performativ instrument of analysis that projects its power—precision, validity, and pertinence—to probe L.A. performances. With multicentricity, I carry on an inquisitive action in the time/space—the interwoven components of a site—provided by this book.

At this moment of utterance, the analytical power of multicentricity is both contained and ephemeral, exactly like that of a performance. The concept has the potential to attain a more lasting and diffusive power identified by Foucault's theory of “discursive formation,” which signifies “a system of dispersion” between statements, textual objects, concepts, and themes that reach “a regularity” in culture.\[^{[132]}\] The power of discursive formation accordingly derives from its cultural scale, demonstrated by the regularity and circulation of similar statements in a massive intertextual performance of correlated concepts. My inquiry on multicentric performances joins recent scholarship that features L.A. as a polycentered and polyglot metropolis. In this regard, the concept of multicentricity may well anticipate the power of discursive formation.

Multicentricity also serves as my proactive strategy to uncover the multicultural ecology of L.A. Multicentricity recommends the terms in which we conceive of cultural relations among disparate constituencies; it nevertheless promises no revolution to overturn existing conditions, nor to reproduce a brave new world with boundless wealth, health, happiness, and justice for all. I propose this notion to stimulate the circulation of a different cultural attitude toward the contemporary world, avowing the centricity (or, viewed from a different angle, the marginality) of each cultural, social, sexual, racial, ideological, and religious group, despite each group's predetermined position in the current hegemony.

I take performance as an art practice most indicative of the cultural states of many Los Angeleses. Performance resembles L.A. to be simultaneously a singular entity (a particular art medium) and a conglomerate of discrete entities (divisible into many genres). There are many Los Angeleses; hence, there is always an elsewhere—another and other Los Angeleses—somewhere in L.A. A similar analysis applies to performance. Since performance is a broad and diverse category, I can hardly produce a panoramic text that tackles all performance genres in their respective complexity.

The three (reflective, redressive, generative) functions that I use to analyze performance's cultural positioning in L.A. by no means exhaust a hybrid medium's interactions with a hybrid city. In fact, when I include the three, I am simultaneously excluding multiple other functions
from my performance genealogy. Worse, the three functions raised here are already insufficient to evaluate most performances covered in the following chapters, for these works either encompass all three functions or jettison any analytical category. I call these performances multicentric, knowing that multicentricity is itself a performative concept with merely the present-tense validity. While multicentricity still awaits its cultural validation as an analytical instrument, I can almost anticipate its obsolescence by the time my book is published. I am confronting the Beckettian conundrum all over again—I cannot go on; I must go on.

To characterize contemporary performances in L.A. as multicentric is to demonstrate their diversity, coexistence, and plenitude, but also to disclose their tensions, contradictions, and negotiations with their immediate cultural environment. My ultimate task lies in avowing and critiquing my own centricity in a multicentric universe that I travel and chart. For I am energized but also framed, circumscribed and hence confined, by my own center, a plexus of subjectivity sculpted by cultural conditioning and modulated by personal and social networks. I deal with the predicament that the more works I cover, the more keenly I am aware of the works left out. I face the enigmas and richness of my others whose embodied actions elude my naming. My multicentric narrative, then, performs the anxiety of terminology, the tangles of temporarily chosen words, the battles of territories and ideologies, the scars left on flesh by fire-spitting tongues. It also remembers some splendid, self-disappearing monuments built by diverse, colored bodies. From the edge, they signal the nothing that will remain at the center.

2. Out of Order

Reading, Writing, Performing (in) L.A.

Prologue: Spring Performance

Spring 1998, the Southern California sky was unseasonably overcast by the tail end of El Niño. Cataclysmic predictions regarding this weather fury seemed to have temporarily displaced the vigilance paid to the seismometer. L.A. emerged—no less conspicuously—as a prime site to study performance art.

The foremost stage was set up at a branch of the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA), in the Frank Gehry-restored barnhouse formerly called the Temporary Contemporary and now known as the Geffen Contemporary, located at the edge of Skid Row and Little Tokyo. From February 8 to May 10, the Geffen Contemporary hosted an exhibition entitled “Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object, 1949–1979,” organized by MOCA's chief curator, Paul Schimmel, who recruited an international team of expert consultants. This large-scale exhibition surveyed a postwar period of visual arts history when a great number of artists throughout the world channeled their energies into live performance as an action, an art-making process, and the art product itself. Geffen's display focused on the remains saved from the originary performances: the objects, paintings, sculptures, drawings, plans, scores, and/or documentary photographs, films, and videotapes that came into existence.
“out of actions.” A constellation of educational and performance events were organized around this exhibition, including an inaugural symposium at UCLA, numerous art talks, and seven consecutive exhibitions for Geffen's Visitors' Gallery, organized by guest curators Paul McCarthy and Mike Kelley, who overtly challenged the main exhibition's object-oriented history of action art by sponsoring live performances.

A concurrent performance festival, “Beyond the Pink,” organized by the Cortical Foundation in association with Denise Spampinato, took place throughout February. “Beyond the Pink” sponsored a series of concerts, live actions, and panel discussions that contextualized and reconstructed various “historical” performances within the three decades framed by “Out of Actions”; it also invited artists from that era to present new performances. “Beyond the Pink” took place primarily at three locations—the Barnsdall Art Park in Hollywood (north), the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena (east), and the Santa Monica Museum of Art in Santa Monica (west). Soon afterward, on March 8, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), located midway between Little Tokyo and Santa Monica's beach, opened with the major exhibition “Love Forever: Yayoi Kusama, 1958–1968.” This show, devoted to an extraordinary Japanese artist whose work was also on view in “Out of Actions,” brought together Kusama's paintings, installations, sculptures, and a film about the guerrilla performances and Happenings she staged during her sojourn in New York City.

The spatial dispersion of these events reflects the multicentric character of L.A.'s urban geography. Their apparent diversity, however, is offset by a thematic unity, which revolves around the motifs of performance and history: the history of performance, the performance of historical performances, and the historicization of performance as a latter-day canon in contemporary art. By the sheer reiteration of these motifs over a span of three months in multiple sites, L.A. seemed to simulate its own cultural El Niño, disseminating master narratives about its ascendancy as a hotbed for the avant-garde art. Like a subliminal ad campaign, these narratives at once attach performance art contiguously to L.A.'s sculptural matrix and disrupt the oft-cited truism of the city's disdain for history. Both “Out of Actions” and “Love Forever” premiered in L.A., with subsequent national and international runs. “Beyond the Pink” assembled a group of international artists affiliated with the now-established Happenings, Fluxus, and John Cage's new music to present live actions for the L.A. audience. These ambitious performative events, reinforced by the shiny image of the new Getty Museum, which boasted the most expensive architectural commission of the twentieth century, virtually announced L.A.'s emergence as a high-culture connoisseur in its own right. As far as this master narrative goes, the city is no longer solely an exporter of mass entertainment and importer of high culture; it also has the ability to export reprocessed high culture. For not only does L.A. value history, but it has found a way to curate, categorize, and assign meanings to a live art medium initially conceived to elude the control of museum economy and the codification of art history. L.A. exhibits its own will to collect and guard an international aesthetic heritage by restoring a most perishable stretch of contemporary art history—that of live performance—for general cultural consumption.

With an acute awareness of L.A.'s master narrative formation, I offer this chapter as a discursive resistance that enacts my experience as a cultural reader, performance writer, and other subject in this heteropolis. My work is indebted to a host of poststructuralist concepts, in particular to Michel Foucault's theories of discourse, power, and counter-memory. Following Foucault, I regard discourse as language in use (texts, statements, self-referential
sign systems in circulation) that produces both an account of reality and the terms in which we understand and express that “reality.” I take power to be a pervasive, amorphous, and elusive force that exerts control or dominance over people and things. I view the notion of counter-memory as the impetus that compels the production of alternative histories and insurgent narratives by other subjects, individuals from or sympathetic to the “subaltern” classes.[3]

My approach to counter-memory emphatically differs from Foucault's insistence on examining all his concepts from a level of anonymity. Foucault's move is rationalized by a skepticism toward the individual subject as the constitutive consciousness behind an action. He states this skepticism clearly in The Order of Things: “If there is one approach that I do reject, however, it is that (one might call it, broadly speaking, the phenomenological approach) which gives absolute priority to the observing subject, which attributes a constitutive role to an act, which places its own point of view at the origin of all historicity— which, in short, leads to a transcendental consciousness.”[4] I might isolate Foucault's remark as the constitutive statement for the postmodern decentered subject. But I wonder why Foucault never takes issue with his own competence in making transcendent judgment about the dislocated subject. In fact, by adopting a tone of detached objectivity, Foucault writes as the authorial, knowing subject rather than as a fragmented, inarticulate nonsubject who can only conjecture and ventriloquise.

As an alternative to the Foucauldian model of decentered nonsubjectivity, I work with the paradigm of decentered centricity/subjectivity. As I argued in Chapter 1, perceptual centricity is able to and often does coexist with epistemic decentering. I believe Foucault has failed to account for the perceptual centricity that has, after all, enabled him to theorize about epistemic decentering. Although he denies his status as an observing subject, Foucault must assume a provisional or strategic centricity in order to play with and be played by the rules that govern his discursive action. My work seeks to make the submerged presence of the writing subject resurface, a move that acknowledges the ineluctable centricity and accentuates the ethical/intellectual accountability of the one who writes.

I attempt to retrieve the decentered centricity of the writing subject as a fallible but also enabling agent of volitional action. The attempt reflects my interest in theorizing counter-hegemonic struggles. It is impossible, I argue, to even conceive of discursive resistance without refiguring the one who writes as an accountable agent. George Yúdice, among others, has indicated that the poststructuralist attack on the notion of identity and agency is problematic because it valorizes the marginality of the decentered, enlightened elites but chastises other subjects' quest for “the material conditions (equal rights, equal pay, institutional recognition, etc.) that the elites already enjoy.”[5] I join Yúdice and other postcolonial cultural critics to assert that identity, agency, autonomy, self-determination, and centricity may well be cogent instruments in the struggles of the oppressed.

Such effort to bring the writing subject back to the theater of discursive actions responds to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's explication of the (Derridean) deconstructive strategy as “an acknowledgment of the dangerousness of what one must use.” As Spivak explains, “deconstruction considers that the subject is always centered and looks at the mechanisms of centering; it doesn't say there is something called the decentered subject.” In other words, there is a distinction between recognizing “the danger of what is powerful and useful” and claiming that the “dangerous thing doesn't exist”: the former is Spivak's take on the lesson
from deconstruction; the latter characterizes the prevalent poststructuralist application of the
decentered subject.[6] My work draws inspiration from the former strategy. Thus, next to
Foucault's concept of language, I reintroduce the individual body as a corporeal agent who
uses words and creates things, featuring the missing subject in Foucault's original French title
for The Order of Things—Les Mots et les choses.

This chapter reassesses the thematic pairing between the medium/material and agent/user in
discursive practice by examining the rise of a recent critical genre described in Elaine Scarry's
edited volume Literature and the Body as “materialist criticism.”[7] Intrigued by this
materialist conception of language, I present my writing as a matter-producing action. I
further accentuate a selfreflexive mood so as to inscribe my body's presence in my writing. I
likewise project to an insurgent performance, which necessarily implicates me, the writer/
agent, in the theatrical matrix of time-space-action-performer-spectator. I am the performing
body, addressing my dialogic action to you, my reader/spectator, within the discursive site of
this chapter—the time/space that frames

my present-tense movement of putting words together into a narrative order. My counter-
hegemonic verbal insurgence entails two simultaneous courses: (1) a constant negotiation
with my expressive medium, the English language, which I command and commands me, and
(2) a self-reflexive sighting of my writing body—a body marked as female, Asian, upper-
middle-class, thirtysomething Californian—as an embodied, particularized, volitional, and
accountable vehicle of my subaltern subjectivity.

This critical performance proceeds in two acts. The first act, divided into two scenes, details
my reading of L.A.'s evolving hegemonic discourse of cultural self-definition, which
happened to use performance art as a trope in 1998. The second act, divided into three scenes,
explores the possibility for an other subject like myself to write counternarratives that depart
from the order of hegemonic discourse. My exploration is motivated in part by an inquiry into
the efficacy of self-generated, individual act of naming in a loaded (overnamed)
cultural/textual environment and in part by a search for theoretical validity for my project of
historicizing contemporary performances in L.A.

Undoubtedly this work is a product of my trade language, populated by theoretical inquires in
the field of performance studies. But my work is also deeply affected by my body's
emplacement in L.A. Such a project is at once enabled, constrained, and complicated by my
multicentric cultural positions, reflecting the various interplay between my biographical
singularity, institutional affiliations, and ideological conditioning. Just as my identity is the
aggregation of multiple biological and socially constructed entities, so my critical perspective
is somewhat astigmatic and my “hermeneutic horizons” are far from unitary.[8] Even so, I do
not consider my multicentricity a vertiginous grounding that would necessarily invalidate my
interpretation. I see my case, instead, as exemplary of the multicentric condition of L.A.,
where hardly any individual subject can remain exempt from the influences of intersecting
cultures and negotiating others. The presupposition of multicentricity suggests that my act of
reading/writing becomes exemplary precisely because it is informed by my embodied
particularities, which simultaneously shape my experiential centricity and multicentric
consciousness. Inhabiting L.A. intensifies my perceptual multicentricity and foregrounds my
fluid identity as a postmodern cultural subject. My reading/writing can then be taken as an
instance of cultural practice implicated by my residency in L.A.

Act I
Scene i: City Quest

If we accept Jean-François Lyotard's definition of the “postmodern” as “incredulity toward metanarratives,”[9] then L.A.'s “master narratives” impart this postmodern city's desire for an anachronistic right to self-imaging. The schizophrenic megalopolis is determined, as it were, to overcome the incredulity by broadcasting excessive information. Those master narratives are underwritten by L.A.'s cultural establishment, for which the two major museums (MOCA and LACMA) served as emissaries in 1998. The 1998 version does not stand alone, however. It is the latest installment in a decade-old saga that has dramatized the city's quest for its cultural self. Performance and history are the ostensible themes for the saga's newest chapter; its actual subject matter, however, has always been L.A., our long-standing protagonist, and its earnest enterprise to upgrade its cultural status.

I trace the official beginning of this flagrantly de-postmodernist saga to 1987, coincided with the first citywide Los Angeles Festival. The festival celebrated L.A.'s appreciation for art other than mass entertainment. Its manifest enthusiasm for noncommercial cultural alternatives tacitly declared the city's pursuit of an identity beyond its mass-media credentials. Such a concerted effort launched by an image-conscious city led Steven Durland to ask: “Is Los Angeles becoming a world-class arts center?”[10] Durland's question resonated with the drive behind the 1987 festival, whose government and corporate sponsors might well wish to answer his question with a flourish of trumpets. In any case, the Los Angeles Festival was not unprecedented in the city's history. It was based on the model established by the festival director Robert Fitzpatrick in the 1984 Olympic Arts Festival. Although the earlier festival earned infamy for L.A. when it commissioned but then rescinded funding for Robert Wilson's monumental theater project the CIVIL warS: a tree is best measured when it's down, it nevertheless deserves credit as the city's first-ever attempt to find a cultural persona apart from its entrenched Hollywood-Disneyland identities. If the Olympic Arts Festival orchestrated an overture to L.A.'s quest for a new image, then the 1987 festival formally launched the city's saga of cultural self-definition by citing “Los Angeles” in its title.

“As Los Angeles becoming a world-class arts center?” Durland answered the question in an ironic affirmative: “yes, it is becoming, ” meaning it was not there yet. Durland's assertion was corroborated by the occurrence of two parallel performance festivals in 1987: the Los Angeles Festival and the Fringe Festival/Los Angeles. The former had an explicitly international, off-town focus, bringing 31 international performance companies to L.A. during the month of September; the latter, in contrast, came into being in a rush after protests by local artists. Directed by the Canadian-born former CalArts president Fitzpatrick, the Los Angeles Festival produced events all over town, including performance, theater, dance, music, visual art, and circus. Concurrently the “Fringe Festival” encompassed “450 events by 500 groups at 210 different sites.”[11] Although the Fringe Festival was designed as an open festival with no selection process, the remarkable abundance and diversity of participating works testified to the vitality of L.A.'s local art scenes. This artistic fertility ironically exposed the perennial marginalization of regional arts, attested by the Los Angeles Festival's initial disregard of local artists. To propitiate protesting artists, the Los Angeles Festival organizers eventually allocated seed money for the separate (but funding-wise unequal) Fringe Festival. This imbalance and the organizational split between the two festivals betrayed the preexisting
paucity of government support for the arts at both city and state levels, a fact raised by Durland to explain why L.A. could not compete with New York City as the cultural capital of the United States.

I must note, however, that the 1987 Los Angeles Festival did not so much invent as inherit the preference for the international over the regional in its programming. As Mike Davis points out, cultural investment in L.A. has long been determined by a deliberate “deregionalization” policy. Symbolic of this deregionalization policy was the city's 1979 decision to change the name of the future Los Angeles Museum of Modern Art to the Museum of Contemporary Art, “‘signifying that it would present art from an international rather than regional perspective.’”[12] The deregionalization policy, as to be expected, has been buttressed by a grand rhetoric of globalism. Although globalism is not necessarily an illegitimate cause, I agree with Davis's assessment that the policy was/is motivated more by mercenary concern than by conscious taste or judgment. The standing policy makes explicit L.A.'s dependence on transnational capital inflows and unwittingly reveals the city's implicit colonization by high cultures imported from the East Coast and Europe.[13]

Because of the torpid art market and grant agencies produced by the deregionalization policy, local artists have suffered from a shortage of funding and underexposure. On the rare occasion when there is an art budget, local artists are frequently bypassed for bigger names from the East Coast. L.A.-based Chicana artist Judith Baca mentions an especially egregious incident in 1992, when the Interstate Bank in downtown L.A. spent an exorbitant amount of money hiring two New York-based artists to produce a mural on the theme of multiculturalism in L.A. The two artists chose “angels from the Basilica of Santa Maria degli Angeli near Assisi, Italy,” as their central figurative symbols for L.A. multiculturalism! “Tragically,” Baca laments, “the $500,000 spent on this single work was more than the whole city budget to fund public murals by ethnic artists who work within Los Angeles's diverse Chinese, African American, Korean, Thai, Chicano, and Central American neighborhoods.”[14] The incident related by Baca confirms the disheartening inevitability of Michael Duncan's more recent observation that most L.A. artists still depend on “a mysterious admixture of powerful New York and European dealers, collectors, curators and writers” for their success.[15] Insofar as the 1987 Los Angeles Festival conformed to the preestablished deregionalization policy, I find its operation revealing an unsettling contradiction: although the city began to pursue a cultural leadership aside from its already secured Hollywood hegemony, it failed to develop a procedure for cultivating an ecosystem conducive to the growth of indigenous alternative cultures.

The succeeding Los Angeles Festivals in 1990 and 1993 managed to introduce new tropes to the master narratives about L.A.'s cultural maturation. The city's deregionalization policy, however, remained fundamentally unquestioned. After the 1987 festival, Fitzpatrick left L.A. to serve as president of Euro Disneyland in France. The festival's corporate funders, as if following a reflex for deregionalization, replaced Fitzpatrick with a celebrity out-of-towner, Peter Sellars, who became director for the two 1990s reincarnations of the Los Angeles Festival.[16]

To his credit, Sellars did endeavor to address the festival's immediate locale by taking a radical departure from Fitzpatrick's Anglophile path. Sellars dubbed L.A. “the city of the future,” praised its “adolescent”-like “nascent energy” and “genuine immaturity,” and decided to steer away from the previous festivals' commemoration of Eurocentric heritage.[17] The
1990 Los Angeles Festival featured cultures from the Pacific Rim. For sixteen days in September, L.A. refashioned itself as an impresario of world cultures adjacent to the Pacific Ocean. The 1990 festival sponsored “550 events by artists and performers from twenty-one countries of Asia, the Pacific, and Latin America.”[18] Many events were outdoors and free to the public. As they often occurred simultaneously, it was physically impossible to attend all the events. A surplus of multiplicity brought home the awareness that there was always festivity spilling out elsewhere. Sellars's decision recognized the undeniable presence of other cultures both neighboring and within L.A. It registered the pressure of the city's changing demography and its large immigrant populations from Asia and Latin America. The gestalt of the festival therefore echoed L.A.’s multicentric environment and mimed its surface human geography as an entry port for multiple cultures from the Pacific Rim.

The 1990 Los Angeles Festival occurred at a time when “multiculturalism” was still gaining momentum in L.A. Although Sellars banned the use of the term in promotional literature about the festival,[19] the product he masterminded begs for comparison with the contemporaneous trend of multiculturalism. In fact, the cultural critic Lisa Lowe pointedly analyzes the 1990 festival as L.A.’s “production of multiculturalism.” Lowe's critique stresses the incommensurability between the aesthetic representation of multiculturalism and the constraining material condition endured by the city's so-called multicultural populations. She also contends that the rhetoric of multiculturalism “levels the important differences and contradictions within and among racial and ethnic minority groups,” thereby obscuring the diversity within marginalized others.[20] Lowe's compelling comment pinpoints the underlying inequity glossed over by the resplendid multiplicity displayed in the 1990 Los Angeles Festival. I find, however, that her thematic identification of multiculturalism with the 1990 festival is, in a different way, as misleading as Sellars's reticence.

By identifying the 1990 Los Angeles Festival as a production of multiculturalism, Lowe has unwittingly collapsed two different cultural phenomena: multiculturalism and interculturalism. Given that these theoretical terms are open to authorial interpretations, I do not fault Lowe (or Sellars) for our hermeneutic differences. I believe, however, more is at stake here than a mere insistence on terminological distinction. To confuse multiculturalism with interculturalism may, I fear, inadvertently reinforce L.A.’s persistent deregionalization policy. Briefly stated, multiculturalism refers to the multiethnic constituencies within a nation such as the United States, whereas interculturalism refers to the encounter and convergence of different national cultures.[21] Since most of the performances featured in the 1990 Los Angeles Festival were transported from foreign territories, I suggest that it can be more accurately described as an embodiment of interculturalism than of multiculturalism.

By emphasizing the Pacific Rim cultures, Director Sellars endeavors to address the interests of local communities in the 1990 Los Angeles Festival. He nevertheless suffers from the same conceptual confusion evident in Lowe's critique, neglecting the distinction between interculturalism and multiculturalism. Sellars's production equates diverse international cultures surrounding L.A. with diverse, multiethnic cultures within L.A. This equation ends up not only privileging the foreign (interculturalism) over the local (multiculturalism) but also rendering the local (the native-born or naturalized multiethnic populations) perpetually foreign. The 1990 festival, in its celebration of transnational cultural exchange, then fits snugly within the city's deregionalization tradition. Despite Sellars's innovation and good intention, his revised version resembles its 1987 predecessor in its tacit hierarchical order.
between imported international luminaries and local satellites. Diversity, heteroglossia, and multicentric plenitude may be tangible contents of his intercultural festival, but they are above all qualities displayed to L.A. spectators as cultural consumers rather than producers.

Some drastic circumstances intervened to make the 1993 Los Angeles Festival different from the preceding models. Originally scheduled for September 1992, the festival was postponed because of the civic unrest in South Central. L.A. was forced to confront the racial/ethnic tension and the socioeconomic disparity among its clashing demographic groups. Multiculturalism suddenly sounded like an effete euphemism for the heteropolis's actual multiethnic tribalism. In an attempt to rebuild L.A., the city quickly set aside discretionary funds for redressive measures.[22] This atmosphere of vigilance and redress was reflected in the 1993 festival's focus on addressing other sectors of L.A.’s ethnic cultural constituents, both indigenous and foreign-born: “African, African-American and Middle Eastern peoples in Los Angeles, the Americas and throughout the world.”[23] Affected by the economic recession, the 1993 festival had a stringent budget, which prevented it from inviting as many international entries as the 1990 festival did. All these factors gave the 1993 festival a program that appeared to balance intercultural bonanza with multicultural splendor, including local artists in more than half of its offerings.

The 1993 Los Angeles Festival proved to be an anomaly in the city's saga of cultural self-definition, since the balance it introduced substantially politicized its program. Whereas interculturalism allows the exoticization of other cultures, making them appealing by aesthetic distance, multiculturalism problematizes such distancing apparatus and insists that the perceptions of otherness are by no means innocuous, but rather imbued with political implications. An intercultural spectacle may want to sell “otherness” as an attractive product; a multicultural performance, in contrast, can use its semblance of otherness to implicate, or even impugn, its mainstream viewers. The multicultural expressions that found their ways into the 1993 festival could not easily be rendered foreign—kept at a distance, hence recuperable by exoticism—because they dealt with phenomena and people intrinsic to L.A. In the wake of the South Central trauma, such a politicized implication struck disconcertingly close to home. By exhibiting both imported and domestic diversity, the 1993 festival laid bare L.A.’s transformation into a minoritized city and indicated that, if social injustice persists, the 1992 urban insurrection might well recur. This ominous undertone sounds quite at odds with the general motifs of progress, maturity, and cosmopolitanism that have enlivened the city's ongoing cultural master narratives. Is it any wonder that corporate funding all but vanished for a post-1993 Los Angeles Festival?

No official explanation was given to account for the dissolution of the Los Angeles Festival. I think, however, that Cornel West's penetrating comment on the 1992 South Central insurrection offers a hint. West reads the “astonishing disappearance of [this] event from public dialogue” as “testimony to just how painful and distressing a serious engagement with race is.”[24] I add to West's comment: Talking of race is especially difficult when the “race” in question resides within the nation-state. For the irreducible presence of multiethnic citizenship demonstrates that it constitutes—rather than stays extrinsic/foreign to—the very conception of its nation-statehood.
Scene ii: Decoding Spring Performance

Although there is no nominal sequel to the Los Angeles Festival after 1993, I read the clusters of events in spring 1998 as a revival of L.A.'s mythic pulse, groping for the right beat in between “Out of Actions” and “Love Forever.” Like their fabulous predecessors, the two cultural monuments of 1998 capitalize on the double theme of bringing world cultures to L.A. for L.A. contains world cultures. The overt text celebrates the city's cosmopolitan spirit, its curiosity about the world, and its eye-dazzling multiplicity. The covert text signals the city's buying power for global cultural products and its confidence in expecting surplus in cultural consumption by its diverse residents.

Specifically, “Out of Actions” traces the simultaneous occurrence of performative activities in divergent action art trends that swept through Eastern and Western Europe, Japan, South America, and the United States during the three decades after World War II. “Love Forever” resurrects the singular oeuvre of a bold Japanese woman artist during her formative decade abroad, when she translated her own cultural shocks from New York into custom-made cultural shocks for New York. Both exhibitions pay tribute to the circulation of expressive currencies made possible by the fusion and collision of alien cultural forces. Highlighting the artistic efficacy of intercultural confluence, they give credence to the sharing of global cultural commonwealth in an era that has witnessed the diminishing of physical distance by transnational mobility and the saturation of the mass media. They embrace interculturalism not just as a promise but as a positive circumstance spurring creativity—the performative objects are displayed as the evidence.

I feel both drawn to and ambivalent about the two 1998 exhibitions. As a resident alien who benefits from L.A.'s intercultural milieu, I cannot but applaud the two exhibitions' acknowledgment of cultural pluralism and artistic multicentricity in a postcolonial world. If nothing else, I see L.A. taking note of the creative vibrancy of its own international communities. The perceived merit of interculturalism turns their alien presence in this heteropolis into a welcome cultural asset. As a critic of L.A.'s master narratives, however, I must speculate on the subliminal logic of the two exhibitions' selective constructions of history. This logic not only maintains the established deregionalization policy but adds new themes to echo the present decade's cultural preoccupation.

The periodization adopted by the two exhibitions—“1949–1979” for “Out of Actions” and “1958–1968” for “Love Forever”—facilitates the elision of certain aspects of history. To be sure, historical framing is a legitimate curatorial prerogative, and it is by necessity selective. I notice, however, that the point of closure for “Out of Actions”—1979—happens to border on the point of entry into the aesthetic/conceptual territory of performance for many ethnic and sexual minority artists in the United States. Kristine Stiles relates this entry to the influence of “social movements from civil rights to feminism,” which set the standard for subsequent explorations of “identity politics, multiculturalism, and post-colonialism.” She also indicates that throughout “the 1980s and 1990s, language-based performance dominated in the United States and Europe.”[25] Without proposing the link, Stiles's analysis implies that “language-based performance” coincided with the rise of multicultural expressions in art. By leaving the past two decades outside its historical framing, I argue, “Out of Actions” circumvents the need to deal with either multiculturalism or language-based performance.
Historical erasure may be accomplished by chronological exclusion, but it can also happen with chronological inclusion. The three decades encompassed by “Out of Actions” do include what the feminist art historian Moira Roth has exultantly called “the amazing decade,” the 1970s, when many women artists chose to practice performance and for the first time in history succeeded in altering the nature/culture of art. Yet from the face of “Out of Actions” shown at the Geffen Contemporary, the collective energy of feminism seemed dissipated into isolated instances of works by individual woman artists. No connection was registered among the performative actions by Carolee Schneemann, Valie Export, Yoko Ono, Hannah Wilke, Eleanor Antin, Lygia Pape, Gina Pane, Orlan, Lynda Benglis, and Suzanne Lacy. These artists have all engaged with gender-specific subject matter. A female-centered trajectory could have been traced by a more suggestive spatial coordination of their works. Instead, their thematic proximity was largely shrouded by the isolated placement of their works in different sections organized by geography. Most of women artists' works, moreover, were collected as video documentaries shown in freestanding booths, which displayed only a list of titles, with no other explanation. Further, there is no entry in the exhibition catalog for these documentaries, even though the videotapes, being residual objects that came out of actions, should have been an integral part of the show's documentation.

The physical isolation and marginalization of women artists' performances in the exhibition space are doubled by the reticence about any feminist impact on performance art in the sumptuous catalog. Schimmel's introductory essay simply omits the presence of feminism from the performance history he traces. The most direct reference to feminism appears in Stiles's concluding essay, which devotes a special section to performances by women. As Stiles notes, “Even the most cursory view of women's performances over the last forty years presents a collective picture of that explosive energy erupting from within culture, a rage acted out in multiple ways and often as multiplicity itself.” What was missing in the visual mapping at Geffen was exactly such a “collective picture” of feminist performances. While I saw clearly the collective multiplicity of the New York School, Fluxus, the Japanese Gutai Group, and the Viennese Aktionists (the Wiener Aktionismus), no equivalent topographical prominence was given to women's performances and the historical exigency of a gynocentric, or at least gender-specific, coalition. Stiles's essay attempts to redress this oversight, but I am puzzled by a curious non-reference. She cites two well-known collective pieces from the 1970s—_Ablutions_ by Judy Chicago, Suzanne Lacy, Sandra Orgel, and Aviva Rahmani (see fig. 5 on page 43) and _In Mourning and In Rage_ by Lacy and Leslie Labowitz—yet she makes no mention of the L.A. feminist community that enabled the very creation of these collaborative performances.

Such strange elisions prompt David Joselit's incisive comment:

To organize an exhibition on action art in Los Angeles which hardly acknowledges the role played during the 1970s by feminist institutions in this city—such as the Feminist Art Program at CalArts, Womanhouse and the Woman's Building—and which similarly ignores Chicano activists like the ASCO group, whose rich and provocative street theater, including “walking murals,” was an essential part of performance history in Los Angeles, is nothing short of shocking. Clearly the organizers are proud to have produced a “global” exhibition which includes little-known artists from Eastern Europe, Russia and Israel. They have been everywhere, it seems, but East L.A., the neighborhood directly adjacent to MOCA's Geffen Contemporary, which housed “Out of Actions.”
Joselit's critique highlights the two significant forces behind L.A. performnames and the Chicano/a guerrilla actions exemplified by ASCO. Amid the murmurs of the international muse exchange captured by “Out of Actions,” the historical circumstances particular to this region's performance history have been unduly silenced. Moreover, Curator Schimmel chose to represent L.A. chiefly through works by three European American male artists: Chris Burden, Paul McCarthy, and Mike Kelley. Perhaps not by coincidence, Burden, McCarthy, and Kelley were the centerpieces in “Helter Skelter,” a 1992 MOCA exhibition on L.A. art curated by Schimmel; they were also featured in the performance section of “Sunshine and Noir,” another 1998 exhibition, billed as an examination of “four decades of Los Angeles art from a European perspective.”

Given his position at MOCA, Schimmel represents by default a canonical L.A. perspective. He charts an intercultural vista for “Out of Actions” by dismissing the political heritage of this region's performances. His curatorial scheme follows L.A.'s master narratives, which tend to erase, defer, or bracket the undesirable regional for the profitable transnational. Further, “Out of Actions,” on its own accord, adds a new motif to L.A.'s theme song of self-naming: the absorption of feminism by the predominantly masculocentric culture in the past two decades. I hear this motif also in “Love Forever,” which extols the value of intercultural amalgamation but downplays the politics of intercultural collision exploited by a highly self-conscious Japanese woman artist.

“Love Forever” professes to treat Kusama's work during her New York years. Kusama arrived in New York in 1958 and left for Japan in 1973. In 1969 Kusama presented Grand Orgy to Awaken the Dead at MoMA (Otherwise Known as the Museum of Modern Art)—Feature Their Usual Display of Nudes, a scandalous Happening in which she directed eight nude participants—male and female—to pose in the museum garden's fountain. “At the Museum you can take off your clothes in good company: renoir, maillol, giacometti, picasso,” read Kusama's original press release. The performance received front-page coverage in the next day's Daily News, a blow-up photograph of which was shown in “Love Forever.” In 1971 Kusama's Self-Obliteration, a film by Jud Yalkut, who collaborated with Kusama to document her orgiastic performances during 1967, was featured at the first annual New York Erotic Film Festival. Since the photographic documents for the 1969 Happening and the film (which was made, admittedly, before 1968) were both included in “Love Forever,” why then did the co-curators, Lynn Zelevansky of LACMA/L.A. and Laura Hoptman of MoMA/NY, take 1968 as the cut-off year for this exhibition? Besides the visual harmony achieved by the symmetry of eights (58–68), I am tempted to ruminate over the erasure of Kusama's last five years in New York from an exhibition thematized precisely around her sojourn in New York.

According to Roth, 1968 marked the conscious beginning of the feminist art movement, when Robin Morgan and other feminists disrupted the Miss America contest in Atlantic City, crowned a live sheep as Miss America, and threw bras and girdles into a “Freedom Trash Can.” I suspect that, by ending the exhibition chronology in 1968, “Love Forever” avoids citing the feminist movement as a pertinent theoretical reference for Kusama's obsessive outputs. Given that the displayed artworks practically throb with afetishistic morphology and proto-feminist ethos, such circumvention of the feminist context seems to unduly constrain the exhibition's theorization of Kusama's art.
To be fair, the circumvention of feminism does not seem to have been a deliberate curatorial policy. Zelevansky in her catalog essay marvels that no critic from the “prefeminist sixties” considered the gender-specificity of Kusama’s work, implying that feminism is an obvious context for this retrospective exhibition. Zelevansky also attributes the recent revival of interest in Kusama’s art to “the broader multicultural debate” that has sensitized “art audiences in the United States to issues of sexuality, gender, and ethnicity.”[32] Yet Zelevansky does not pursue this line of development. The feminist implications in Kusama’s art remain peripheral to the theorization of her oeuvre in “Love Forever.” To me, the result is a discrepancy between what is represented discursively (through periodization and catalog explication) and what is presented visually (through the displayed artworks). This discrepancy may be a cautious subterfuge on the part of the co-curators, who allow the feminist and anti-imperialist implications of Kusama’s art to radiate as a visual dis/play without spelling them out in the catalog. Thus, they avoid unfashionable didacticism and the risk of being attacked by critics less sympathetic toward Kusama’s political cause.[33] It is also possible, however, that the discrepancy is a symptom of a depoliticized repression. In any case, I am somewhat dismayed that “Love Forever” steers away from the rebellious spirit of its own artist-subject, who never hesitated to assault the world with her politics. The discourse surrounding the exhibition has missed the opportunity for a frontal engagement with the gender-specific and race-conscious materiality of Kusama’s art, which—at least to my eyes—centers around a humorous deconstruction of the phallus myth and a blatant sabotage of Eurocentrism through parody, excessive repetition, and usurpation (see fig. 7). What has been elided in “Love Forever,” then, is the central significance of Kusama’s sexual and racial politics in her intercultural and performative art.

From the bewildering erasures and non-references I perceived in “Out of Actions” and “Love Forever,” I read a subtext of suspicion, indifference, or aversion to feminism. This subtext is the new theme added to L.A.’s selfdefining master narratives. The two exhibitions’ oh-not-feminist-again! sentiments reflect the mood of the current cultural moment, one reeling from popular repudiations of feminism in the past two decades. Susan Faludi’s 1991 book, Backlash, traces the eruption of antifeminist assaults in the 1980s. These assaults appropriated the language of feminism in order to pronounce feminist concepts like equality, liberation, independence, and autonomy as the very problems brought by feminism to women. According to Faludi, at a crucial juncture in the mid-1980s when “record numbers of younger women were supporting feminist goals,” the media introduced the new buzzword “postfeminism” to signify the putative rejection of feminism by younger women from the “postfeminist generation.”[34] Under the climate of patriarchal vigilance, feminism is retrofit with pejorative connotations to sound passé, strident, didactic, excessive, and unnecessary. Faludi’s study exposes the media strategies employed by the androcentric hegemony to deal with its gynophobia.
and to regain the upper hand in its not-so-secret gender warfare. Amelia Jones extends Faludi's argument in her essay “Postfeminism, Feminist Pleasures, and Embodied Theories of Art,” which locates the emergence of postfeminist rhetoric at a period when “the cultural authority of Anglo masculinity” felt the threat of “counter-identities” articulated by the increasingly visible and vociferous gay, feminist, and nonwhite subjects. Jones suggests that postfeminist discourses are promoted by the conservative, Anglo, and masculinist cultural establishment specifically to regain control over sexual as well as racial politics.

I consider Jones's analysis especially noteworthy in linking feminist struggles with activist agitation waged by other subaltern subjects, thus articulating the ideological affinities between feminism and multiculturalism. No matter how contested both terms are, feminism and multiculturalism share a similar goal of emancipating subjugated individuals, whether their oppressions are based on gender or on other identificational categories such as race, ethnicity, sexual preference, age, or class. Feminism has brought to the fore the significance of sexual difference, just as multiculturalism has attempted to negotiate racial and other human differences. The coalition politics demonstrated by the linkage between feminism and multiculturalism may explain why feminism has become a new target for vigilant muffling in L.A.’s hegemonic discourse.

In the past L.A.'s self-naming saga enlisted the deregionalization policy. Armed with the irrefutable rhetoric of globalism, the policy rationalized the displacement of multiculturalism by interculturalism. The region's feminist performance history was not an issue before because it was simply not addressed by the three theater-centered Los Angeles Festivals. In charting the history of action art, however, the role of feminism could not be ignored. Consequently, this issue needed to be resolved in the 1998 version of the L.A. saga. In the two 1998 exhibitions, the presence of feminism is acknowledged, but its historical/theoretical prominence is radically compromised and the collective multiplicity of feminist politics is utterly repressed.
Most emblematic of the strategic repression of feminist collectivity is an omission I noticed in “Out of Actions”: the absence of Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* (1979), a monumental performative installation involving hundreds of women's prolonged, collaborative actions/labors (fig. 8). In 1996 Amelia Jones curated an impressive exhibition “Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party* in Feminist Art History” for the UCLA Armand Hammer Museum. For the first time in L.A. “Sexual Politics” showed the history-breaking—if only for its controversy—feminist installation originally made in L.A. almost two decades earlier. It also traced the repercussion of the central core imageries explored by The Dinner Party in other feminist artworks. Yet this important exhibition was savaged by the press and entirely ignored by “Out of Actions.” Given the prevailing—postfeminist—zeitgeist of our time, it is not surprising that an exhibition devoted entirely to feminist art and performance, with a contentious object that evokes the female body at its center, would have been martyred to critical censures from feminists, nonfeminists, antifeminists, and postfeminists alike. Some of the criticisms—especially from older feminists—might be heard as reactions against Chicago's authoritarian attitude and aggressive self-promotion. As a member from the New York feminist collective Guerrilla Girls remarked on the group's choice of anonymity: “We were a little afraid for our own careers, but more important, we just didn't want any more Judy Chicagos. No more monsters.” Other censures, however, sound like reactions against the academic rigor and intellectual scope that Jones brought to the exhibition, situating it in a vigorous context of feminist theories. I argue that these criticisms should neither nullify nor eviscerate the cultural value of a show like “Sexual Politics,” which emerged at an anxious historical moment precisely to redress the postfeminist rhetoric. We could even take those overinvested critical responses to be testimonies to the provocability and relevance of “Sexual Politics” as a contemporary feminist event.

One may object that *The Dinner Party* does not fit the bill for action art. Yet Piero Manzoni's *Merda d'artista* (Artist's shit), a can of excrement, was included in “Out of Actions.” Moreover, among the objects selected from L.A. in 1979 were Burden's *The Big Wheel* (the title of which reveals every element in it, except for the motorcycle) and Kelley's *Unstoppable Force vs. Immovable Object* (a cardboard tube and two whoopee cushions). Why, then, was there not even a single photograph about *The Dinner Party*? “Love Forever” received advance advertisement through “Out of Actions,” which included numerous objects

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by Kusama. The museum's bookstore also displayed many catalogs from past exhibitions in other venues that addressed issues germane to action art. Yet there was no reference to “Sexual Politics,” an entirely relevant and recent L.A. exhibition. I cannot help but remember being greeted at the main entrance to “Sexual Politics” by a huge portrait by Renée Cox. Entitled Yo Mama (1993), the portrait features a tall, strong, gorgeous African American woman holding a naked interracial baby in front of her nude body. I wonder if it wasn't Jones's choice to illustrate a feminist and multiculturalist continuum that really got “Sexual Politics” into trouble.

Tellingly, Christopher Knight, the chief art critic for the Los Angeles Times, wrote two drastically different reviews for “Sexual Politics” and “Out of Actions.” Knight chastises “Sexual Politics” for resurrecting “a failed work of art,” The Dinner Party, and for privileging theory over art, which he believes encumbers the show. He confidently assumes his negative judgment of The Dinner Party to be the general truth; he also has no qualms about perpetuating the theory versus practice dichotomy, against which many feminist artists rebel. Although Knight admits in his review that “feminist thought” has succeeded in being “an operative engine within current artistic discourse,” he attacks The Dinner Party as a “didactic tool for political reform,” ridicules the installation's desire for monumentality, and censures the curator for being “an ideologist” who allowed “lengthy object-labels and preachy didactic panels” to “engulf” the displayed art. Knight's comment betrays his discomfort with the demand of “feminist thought,” even though he is willing to appreciate some more reticent, if feminist, artworks for their “exquisite” quality. In contrast, Knight commends “Out of Actions” for its “rambunctious, wide-ranging” scope celebrating the “post-movement, transnational moment” in art and for the homage it pays to local stars: “McCarthy, Kelley and Chris Burden—artists central to Schimmel's influential 1992 mega-hit, ‘Helter Skelter: L.A. Art in the 90s.’” In essence, what he articulates echoes the tendencies in L.A.'s master narratives: an exultation of the city's global reach, a belittling of the region's extraordinary feminist legacy, and a consistent lionization of the same three artists deemed most representative of L.A. performances.

**Act II**

**Scene i: Performer's Tools**

An interpretive act is based on interactions between the interpreter, the material being interpreted, and the material/vehicle used to perform the interpretation. The interpreter must exercise as well as tolerate a certain degree of hermeneutic violence in order to perform the task at all. My reading of L.A.'s master narratives of self-definition entails a high degree of interpretive aggression, not only because the material under scrutiny is highly complex, but also because there is a political stake in my interpretation. By no means is the “I” who reads a neutral agent or a transparent deciphering instrument endowed with impartial judgment. What's worse, I cannot exert an unwavering control over my chosen communicative medium: an ineluctably, if obliquely, Sinofied Anglo-American language. Thus, in emphatic contrast to the apolitical and transcendent act claimed by most formalist interpreters, I recognize my hermeneutic action to be simultaneously enabled and conditioned by my racialized and sexualized viewpoints, which reflect my status as an other subject. Adding to my perceptual centricity is the elusiveness of my “texts,” which encompass heterogeneous materials, such as...
produced artistic events, their discursive and imagistic representations, their subliminal motives and vestigial configurations that have betrayed the sponsoring city's cultural imago. While some of these materials are attributable to a single author, I read them cumulatively as a class of expressions endorsed by the status quo. There is, then, an imbalance of power in the collective cultural texts I read and the individual text I write/produce from that reading. I may strain my vocal chords to claim that my project exercises a private affirmative action. But, practically, how do I conceptualize the probable cultural efficacy of my writing?

As I mentioned earlier, Elaine Scarry in *Literature and the Body* describes a recent genre of literary/cultural critique called “materialist criticism.” Materialist criticism advocates a materialist conception of language, which, as Scarry elaborates, “has two companion assumptions: first, that language is capable of registering in its own contours the contours and weight of the material world; second, that language may enter, act on, and alter the material world.” The first assumption regards language, constituted by verbal signs assembled for a discursive act, as matter that at once bears a referential connection with the material world and occupies a space as its own material reality. The second assumption takes off from the first to assert language's material capacity to penetrate, organize, form, and alter the material world. These assumptions stress the materiality of language and the use of language as a material act, reinforcing the concrete relation between language (a vehicle of the individual voice) and the critic (the body subject who uses language as the material for her/his critical project). Featuring the critic as the individual agent engaged in a volitional action, materialist criticism espouses the interventionist reflex of proactive cultural practice. It aspires to generate new voices that may impinge on what preexisted and may activate “the self-revising character of material culture at large.”

Scarry's explication of materialist criticism helps me conceptualize the efficacy of my reading/writing project, because her analysis implies that any action committed by a live body matters and that any act of producing language has consequence. By featuring the body as a user of language, Scarry's argument attempts to reclaim the power of individual agency from most poststructuralist theorists' skepticism about the autonomous humanist subject. This move to restore the humanist subject is, however, contentious. Although I cling to the notion of individual agency as a propelling force behind my discursive insurgence, I have reservations about an unproblematic retrieval of the autonomous humanist subject, considering that it was precisely this subject who played a central role in the Western history of colonialism, slavery, and racist/sexist/classist discrimination. At the same time I remember Spivak's advice about noting the danger but avowing the ongoing relevance and usefulness of a powerful concept. While we must vigilantly place the individual humanist subject under critique, I believe that this concept of subjectivity, with some adjustments, may be deployed strategically in a different context to validate the cultural/political resistance of other subjects. What is perniciously organized by the hegemonic class to exercise its power and to marginalize its others may be the very tactic that empowers subaltern subjects to oppose their own marginalization. In this light, Scarry's fervent recovery of individual agency and independent subject are needed antidotes to the normative assumption about the subaltern other's dormant, impotent, and unformed subjectivity. Materialist criticism insists on the possibility that the master's tool may still be just a tool. Contaminated as the tool may be prior to use, the newer tool user does have the opportunity to remold or use it in unexpected ways.
Noting their efficacy for insurgence, I would, nonetheless, take to task some of Scarry's assumptions concerning the material link between language and the body, including, specifically, (1) that language matters, (2) that the individual body has redemptive linguistic capacity, and (3) that materialist criticism exercises an ethical protocol. First, since language is and produces matter, the relation between language and the body is neither secured nor unilateral. The use of language by the body then resembles a contest between two kinds of materiality. The body, as a corporeal agent, may exert control over language, but oftentimes the body is subject to the control of language. Second, the individual voice, as a transmitter of language, seldom only speaks the individual will, since the supposed “individual will” is partially impelled by collective impulse, partially informed by ideological leanings, and partially affected by contingencies and vicissitudes. Third, the ethical stance of individual agency is never assured.[45] The live body may use language to create as much as to destroy the material world. A new voice is then just another voice, not necessarily a better voice. Thus, in effect, one could use Scarry's argument conversely to mark the power of hegemonic discourse and the limit of individual agency. The materiality of language confirms the former's dominion,

whereas the vulnerability and uncertainty of the body expose the latter's precariousness.

My present investigation is facilitated by the linkage between language and the body precisely because Scarry's theoretical articulation of materialist criticism can be argued both ways—from the perspective of the hegemonic class or from those of its others. On the one hand, Scarry's analysis has retrieved language's referential potential to impinge on the world. It highlights what's at stake for the hegemonic class to compose master narratives—because those narratives matter. On the other hand, materialist criticism places the individual body back on stage as an agent for volitional action. By so doing it restores some degree of self-determinacy to other subjects for their acts of producing alternative narratives—which also matter. The potential power of materialist criticism thus lies in the weight it gives to a corporeal agent's positive action in the face of overwhelming counterforces. These forces may come from outside, embodied by the power structures behind hegemonic discourses; they may also reside within, comprising the biographical and ideological particularities that at once constrain and enable the individual agent/body subject. In light of such unequal competition between the status quo and individual dissenters, the proposition advanced by materialist criticism answers the exigency of those subaltern others who desire to launch cultural resistance de spite unpredictable results.

I take materialist criticism as a paradigm for my counterhegemonic struggles. I propose, however, to amend and complicate Scarry's analysis by accentuating two concepts: the recognition of strategic flexibility and the production of language as a writing process. We shall see how both concepts privilege performativity in the link between language and the (critic's) body endorsed by materialist criticism.[46]

The first concept stems from my doubts about Scarry's avowal of materialist criticism's ethical merit. I find it more useful to regard materialist criticism not as a methodology endowed with transcendent moral value but as a set of strategic measures, capable of self-adjusting in the event of accomplishing variable objectives. My stress on strategic flexibility reframes materialist criticism as an embodied action that takes place in an interactive context resembling a performance. This performativ action is realized through a constant negotiation among four intersecting elements: the performing body (the critic/agent/subject), the body's production of language (the performing of a critical act), the surrounding environment (the
time/space of performance, the contingencies and emergent circumstances that alter the performance), and the projected audience (the addressee or intended reader). I reiterate that a performance is taken in this context as a phenomenon that manifests a necessarily constrained intentionality rather than a deed with guaranteed ethical value—after all, an insurgence is not in itself morally superior to the conservation of established heritage.

The second concept points to the literal action engaged by materialist criticism: the critic/body subject's production of language through writing, a strategic, contingent, volatile, and provisional process that yields a piece of writing as the product. Here I compare the verbal/interpretive act undertaken by a critical subject to an immediate performance of accumulating and deploying temporarily chosen words. This analogy doubles the discursive act of writing to be a performative action—“the continuous present of a doing,” as Judith Butler phrases it—that answers the call of the writer's agency. The parallel between writing and performance discloses that a body's production of language through writing is a corporeal action whose end product becomes itself through the serial inscription of a transactional process—from reading to writing and back again. I insert performativity into the materiality of language to foreground that the writing action is constituted by the enactment of naming (performativity) together with the name (materiality) produced. In my schema, then, writing is understood as a partially controlled implementation of a process-product, that which names/enacts itself but ends up yielding something exceeding or other than itself, like a performance. When a writer is an other subject, performativity becomes an especially crucial dimension in her/his counterhegemonic efforts, for it is through the act of performing, even more than the resulting performance, that s/he partakes of the power of naming.

The double emphasis on materiality and performativity of language sheds new light on my reading of L.A.'s saga of cultural self-definition. On the one hand, the materialist slant toward positivity/activism suggests that mere reactions to undesirable representation and subliminal omission are insufficient. These reactions ironically attest to the strength of hegemonic discourse. For an other subject—like myself—to devise strategies that redistribute power, it is most useful to begin by recognizing the strength of hegemonic discourse. After all, the order established by hegemonic discourse emanates from the aggregated desire and discursive strategies of a class of individuals who have attained hegemony. Similar to the discourse that forcefully disseminates its agenda, hegemony matters. On the other hand, the focus on performativity relieves other subjects of the pressure of overdetermination and inescapable subjugation, because it urges them to heed the efficacy of self-agency and to seize the momentum for enacting resistance. Through self performance, an other subject can find an outlet for her/his suppressed voice and gain access to the power of naming.

Based on such reasoning, the question I raise for my counterhegemonic struggle shifts from “How do I discredit the power of the prevailing order?” to “How does the prevailing order exercise power?” Insurgence starts with a penetrating study of the master's tools.

Scene ii: Masterpiece Theater
“Out of Actions” presents a particular text imbued with the canonical will of MOCA, an institution representing both the established visual art world and L.A.’s current hegemony. Instead of assuming a priori an adversarial position against MOCA's canonical pretension, I choose to decipher the authoritative structure of its historicization from within its order.[48]

Above all, the order of “Out of Actions” exists in a matrix of interconnected monads, which include the institutional apparatus, the economic mechanism, and the sponsors, curators, artists, and authors who cocreate the exhibition. This order appears to be inseparable from its consecration by the museum's power to regulate and transmit knowledge. The power of this order is then founded on the general consent of museum patrons who accept the museum's authority in proffering “historical truth” and “valuable art” as its products. The viewing public temporarily assumes a suspension of disbelief in exchange for the experience of being informed, provoked, or entertained by the orderly text displayed in the museum site for a pre-planned duration. In this respect, the order's power is theatrical, for the power exercises itself as a consensual illusion. Its credibility and affectability are both given and received by the same constituency: the consumers rather than the producers of this illusion. The orderly text that unfolds its sundry splendors at Geffen is the script prepared for a performance occasion, while the museum is the theater where an intentional and durational human activity happens.

The power of this order increases as the mass of its audience increases. To the extent that power cannot be without its effect being borne, “Out of Actions” would have been a futile spectacle without being witnessed by an audience. This is not to say that “Out of Actions” cannot unilaterally create a self-sustaining order that claims its own power as matter. The difference between its public-sanctioned power (public power) as a cultural event and its self-proclaimed power (private power) as an enacted materiality lies in its scale of influence.[49] The public power depends on the agreement of a great mass of spectatorial bodies who consume and fetishize its effect; the private power is a self-generated enactment serving the interest of its producer, who can only project the product's possible effect on others.

If the public power is theatrical, then the private power is performative. By virtue of this distinction, I maintain that the order constructed by and for “Out of Actions”—both prior to and independent from its public power—is performative. The objects selected for display, the carefully annotated originary performances from which these objects are detached, the ephemeral performance contexts permanently restored in the exhibition catalog, and the aspects of history privileged in the catalog's performance genealogy are all featured players in an orchestrated museum performance. We can then approach the three decades of history made between “performance and the object”—the publicized subject/subtitle for “Out of Actions”—as a particular performance of made history, thoroughly researched but subjectively framed. It presents the sum total of some coherent truths/fabrications, shored up by painterly, photographic, figurative, sculptural, and discursive documents, yet to a certain degree unverifiable. Like the body of action art, the past pursued by “Out of Actions” has disappeared. Residual objects cannot resurrect dead performances; rather, they function as actors and components of a new ensemble performance.

For “Out of Actions,” the key to its success (i.e., attaining public power) lies in its polished surface of coherence, disinterestedness, normative standard, intellectual rigor, and authority, all reified qualities testifying to its conventionalized high cultural standing. But this surface/order cannot have public purchase without simultaneously offering its viewers a high
degree of enjoyment. The performance history composed by “Out of Actions” is able to reach a high level of truth-value because it is a well-crafted performance. Thus, the exhibition's success actually results from a sophisticated manifestation of its performativity. Herein lies an answer to my question on how the prevailing order exercises its power: through dazzling performances. The answer presupposes my next question: “How do I perform my agency as an other subject in my resistance against the dazzling hegemonic order?”

Scene iii: Out of Order

Given the daunting distance between public and private power, I must attempt no less than an oxymoronic feat in my insurgent performance. Since “Out of Actions” puns on two premises—that its displayed objects came from (out of) art actions and that there are no more (out of) art actions—my project strives to perform out of order. I will learn from (grow out of) the order of historicization realized by “Out of Actions” and divert from (leap out of) the order maintained by various scenario-making occasions when L.A.’s cultural establishment has mobilized to delineate its self-imaging and historical will. To perform out of order is then to mark the productive potential of a simultaneously imitative and transgressive action.

“Out of Actions” has taught me the performative proclivity in history-making. This understanding suggests that the past is a chameleon ground for the present performance of desire-ridden words. It urges that I turn from a reader of history (the viewer/consumer) into a writer of history (the producer/performer) in order to retroactively make my history happen, if only within the performative time/space of my book. My writing tills and seeds the ground of history so as to bring into representational visibility the aspects of performance art that have been overlooked, drawing out voices from those who have been silenced.

In composing my version of L.A.'s performance genealogy, I aim specifically to redress the two premises of “Out of Actions”: (1) the object-oriented, visual art-centered view of performance, and (2) the marking of 1979 as the closure to an era when allegedly the most significant performances were produced. While I agree that both premises are reasonable starting points, I question their totalizing effect in promulgating a scopophiliac approach to performance. “Out of Actions” bolsters a monocentric vision about performance by charting this hybrid medium's genealogy solely within the visual arts. As Bonnie Marranca incisively observes, the exhibition's overemphasis on performance's genetic resemblance to painting and sculpture gives short shrift to the roles that verbal genres (poetry, philosophy, mythology) and other time-based art forms (theater, dance, music) have played in action art.

By focusing on a particular region in my performance study, my work aims to disrupt the order cumulatively constructed by those master narratives through which L.A. names itself. This hegemonic order pays tribute to cultural diversity, but it also contains diversity furtively in the festival and exhibition space where the exigencies of dealing with cultural differences have a designated duration. This order champions trans national, cross-coastal, inter cultural communications, so that the humble and unsightly domestic spectacles of multi cultural exceptions to the supposed national norm can be veiled, kept in abeyance, for as long as their imaginary occlusion might last. This order often bypasses the local for the international (read New York City, Europe, Japan, and the like), frequently identifies the local as the international (Asian American as Asian, Chicano/a as Mexican or Latin American), and perhaps fantasizes that the international can teach the local how to get along—to echo Rodney
King's famous remark. In its flight from the domestic, this order also becomes oblivious to the undeniable cultural contributions made by a gendered class traditionally associated with the domestic: women/artists/citizens. As a result, this order has perpetuated the conventional standing of culture as independent leisure activities that serve the interest of its patron class, whether through the capitalistic courtship for transnational commerce or through the patriarchal relegation of feminist and multicultural art. My writing breaks out of this order, not to nullify its achievement, but to return to its repressed: to stories untold, bodies not there, objects splintered, performances forgotten, and those art actions still alive and well and living in L.A.

Delirious perhaps, but I am interested in staking my claim on the ongoing fabulation/fabrication of L.A.'s self-naming narratives. Since getting out of order is frequently getting into trouble (borrowing Judith Butler's celebrated conceit in *Gender Trouble*),[51] my book traverses the most sensitive node touched by “Sexual Politics”: the coalition politics between feminism and multiculturalism as well as their influences on L.A. performances. I direct my telescope from the splendid far-away to the troublesome here-to-stay by writing a partial history about this region's/performances activities that express L.A.'s own multicentricity. My narrative pivots around the slippery center where my body and my language meet, noting its immense mystery, yet heeding those moments of *blind-birthing* that push/rush my writerly actions. Joining in the city quest for its cultural identity, I proceed from an eccentric margin/center. My body that breathes, eats, speaks, reads, and writes enacts a visible, audible, tactile, olfactory, and thermo-somatic specimen of corporeal diversity, a mind-flesh-tongue of difference, a difference made in L.A.

### 3. Engendering Other/Selves

**Suzanne Lacy**

**Sights Unforeseen**

*Site/Moment: Route 126, 1972.* A fantastic spectacle is on display along Route 126 near Valencia, attracting wayward glances from unsuspecting automobile drivers and hesitant rodents. The day before, hardly anyone would have given prolonged thought to a wrecked convertible stalled in an arid landscape next to a rustic highway. The dumped car was merely an unfortunate eyesore not quite camouflaged yet by dust, rust, fallen branches, and dried weeds. But an about-face has occurred: the vehicle has been resuscitated, parodically gendered, and transmuted into an eye-catching creature-sculpture named “Pink Jalopy” (fig. 9). True to her name, Pink Jalopy has an all-pink body surface, velvet red interior skin, a pink eye with a dark iris, another pink eye with a red eyelid and a rabbit-red pupil. Prostrate, Pink Jalopy has two mouths: one, with a tongue sticking out, or a heart exposed, opening wide toward the west; another shimmering in her plastic lipstick, voraciously chewing a mass of beard. Pink Jalopy has just received her renaissance makeover, in a participatory happening called *Car Renovation*, enacted by Suzanne Lacy, with other members of the Feminist Art program at CalArts.[1]
Car Renovation, conceived by Suzanne Lacy, an Anglo American feminist artist, encompasses two phases: the initial process of a live action performed by Lacy and her feminist classmates to refurbish an actual, damaged car and a subsequent, indefinite process in which their artwork is on display in an unmarked, open-air site. Mynarrative cuts into this piece at an effectively posthumous moment, when the restorative live action has vanished and the artistic team has departed from the site, yielding Pink Jalopy as a residual object. Static in its plasticity, Pink Jalopy is nevertheless enlivened by its allegorical performativity. Lacy and her participants paint the vehicle in pink, reappropriating a color that connotes lightweight, ladylike delicacy, and parodically en/ gender their auto installation as female—or, at least, as feminine or femalelike. Their collective artwork thus becomes a feminist allegory, a monument to a group of women's curative labor. Placed in ostentatious relief from its surroundings, Car Renovation produces an unexpected sight, poised to transform the prevailing desolation into an interactive drama. With blatant humor, Pink Jalopy exhibits herself as a feminized article, stretching her body on the roadside, taking turns in seducing passersby, defying the debilitating forces of nature, and simply being splendid in her re-made self.

A prolific artist and writer, Lacy was an active contributor to L.A.'s performance art scene from the genre's inception there in the early 1970s and has continued to practice performance art in many different formats. When she joined Judy Chicago's inaugural Feminist Art Program at Fresno State College in 1970, Lacy found herself at the juncture between feminism and art. She entered the interdisciplinary and experimental environment of CalArts at Valencia in 1971, attending the graduate program in social design and working as a teaching assistant in the Feminist Art Program, which transferred to CalArts that year. Car Renovation was actually a class project assigned by Chicago, with students asked to create performances alongside Route 126, the road between CalArts and the beach.

As a self-identified feminist artist, Lacy has created performances guided by an activist spirit, a search for social relevance, and inquiry into self/other dynamics. Her feminist projects critique dominant cultural assumptions in both the elitist art world and popular culture. Her
work zeros in on the diverse sociocultural forces that contradict her claim to artistic subjectivity and to full—de facto—citizenship, seeking to expose, subvert, and alter the normative/hegemonic structure of power. Lacy tackles her experiences of otherness and challenges her sexualized subjugation by treating her own subjectivity as both particular (belonging to her personal body/self) and exemplary (expressing the common political conditioning of her gendered class).[2] By virtue of her political resolve and activist practice, I regard Lacy's feminist performances in L.A. as redressive measures against some deep-seated problems that have plagued the city's multicentric and polarized cultural environments.

Lacy's practice reflects the confluence of two types of redressive performance in the 1970s: conceptual/lifelike performance informed by Allan Kaprow and feminist performance inspired by the women's movement. While Lacy's feminist conviction has always been the dominant force in her art-making, part of her attitude toward art can be traced to Kaprow's influence. Through his insistence on the blurring of art and life, Kaprow brings a heightened awareness to quotidian activities, either reframing these activities as art or appreciating their innate qualities as artistic. His art/life projects often turn nonart routines into live art events merely by re-perceiving them outside habitual contexts. His lifelike performances attempt to democratize art as a widely accessible tonic, a perceptual/conceptual retooler of life, thereby redressing the commercial art world's parochial professionalism.

Having studied with Kaprow at CalArts, Lacy emulates her teacher's democratic approach to art-making. In its jubilant mood, *Car Renovation* exercises this vein of lifelike redressive performance, for it celebrates the fortuitous encounter with a decrepit object in life by performing a transubstantiation procedure, turning this once utilitarian item into a gratuitous sculpture. But there is something else in this work that punctures the relaxed gestalt of a lifelike performance. The pointed message is revealed in Lacy's choice to adorn the vehicle in pink, a color feminist artists reclaimed from popular constructions of femininity in the early 1970s. The issues of sexual difference and gender construction become foregrounded in *Car Renovation*, a feminist happening that explicitly redresses the nongendered universality of the Kaprowian lifelike performance. In this respect, *Car Renovation* is a politicized redressive performance, poking fun at the patriarchal hegemony that has both naturalized and denied an existing gender/sex hierarchy.

*Car Renovation* is enacted specifically at the intersection of Lacy's individual circumstances with her larger geocultural location, L.A. Invested with the artist's feminist politics, *Car Renovation* demonstrates the characteristics that define Lacy's art/cultural practice: a proactive resolve, a commitment to other subjects, a preference for participatory action, and an engagement with the immediate site. An artist by trade, Lacy is a maker of symbolic signifying systems. But she also strives to connect the symbol with the material world, studiously exceeding the supposed boundary of “art” in order to touch “life”— to cite Kaprow'sart/life dichotomy. There is a resulting engagement with both the literal (factual) and the metaphorical (artifactual) dimensions in Lacy's performances.

The wrecked convertible in *Car Renovation*, for instance, is at once raw material and rhetorical device. As I read it, the convertible's initial damaged state relates it to other disenfranchised subjects, with whom Lacy feels an emotional and ethical bond. Lacy and her participants further feminize their joint artwork in a culturally intelligible code, hence turning it into a metonymy for women in general. If we consider that a car is also conventionally addressed as a “she,” the women artists' effort in embalming a dead convertible amounts to a
feminist intervention, which sarcastically quotes the melodramatic motif of rescuing a
damsel-in-distress only to protest against the abandonment of a much-ab/used vehicle in a
roadside open grave. Their actual attempt to salvage the car therefore hints at the symbolic
redemption of all women. While this implied telos may be seen as too immoderate or naive,
its grandiosity is humorously checked by the artwork's literal status as an automobiled, an apt
synechoche for its broader motor politan locale. Inthis sense, the women artists' collective
action becomes nothing but a Girl Scout good deed to redecorate the environment. Thus, Car Renevaton is simultaneously globalized as a feminist project, advocating all women's
interest, and localized as a project in L.A., designating the particular community it serves.

Car Renovation evinces an ethos of connection that sustains Lacy's feminist vision. The piece
locates its aesthetic pleasure in an external network of sympathetic affiliations that at once
binds Lacy together with her participants and links their artwork metonymically with
themselves and with other unspecified female subjects. On the one hand, the actual
interactions among the participating artists embody their coalition politics, a coalition based
on common purpose. On the other hand, the abstract reference to an allegorical womanhood articulates
Lacy's feminist identity politics, one based on her belief in the experiential affinities among
women.

Despite its disarming humor, Car Renovation draws on stereotypical myths about
“sentimental femininity.” As such, it is vulnerable to the charge of “essentialism,” in a debate
that has raged through the terrain of feminist and cultural theories since the 1980s.[3] Lacy's
call for a feminist solidarity—through external networks and internal reference to femaleness
—may be criticized for romanticizing womanhood and bracketing the multiplicitous
contradictions among female, or female-identified, subjects. Viewed through the
antiessentialist lens, Lacy is at fault for assuming that gender identity can serve as a glue
cohering all female subjects across diverse cultural, class, sexuality, and age strata and for her
utopian projection of an ideal sisterhood. But is Lacy's idealism instrumental to her art? I ask.
Is it not possible that some of her essentialist strategies are precisely the theoretical
“problems” that her feminist performances must absorb in order to practice her identity
politics?

Identity politics, as Marvin Carlson points out, emerged in the 1980s and 1990s as a
prominent trope among performance artists.[4] Following my own assessment, identity politics
characteristically involves two conceptual platforms: (1) an individual politics based on the
distinction between self and other, and (2) a coalition politics based on the commonality
among similar selves. The performative investigations of identity politics, then, tread the
minefield of essentialism, which may be defined in the present context as the belief in either a
given essence that qualifies a particular entity (e.g., “womb-ness” as “woman's nature”) or an
irreducible foundation that homogenizes a group of entities (e.g., “skin color” as an
identificational marker for “race”). Lacy began practicing performance art long before the
term “identity politics” became domesticated in the art world. Her feminist art, however, may
be seen as a precursor to the identity performance associated especially with multiculturalism
and queer politics in the later decades. In this sense, Lacy's performance of feminist
identity/politics is surely not above suspicion of essentialism.

The basis of Lacy's identity politics derives from her acceptance of her female, or non-male,
gender without contest. This assumption of a definite gender identity serves not only as a
departure point for her individual art practice but also as a foundation for her feminist politics. In the 1970s Lacy joined other feminist artists in utilizing her own body as an embodied source to understand her female-sexed-and-gendered body/self/subject. Her concurrent large-scale performances weremade explicitly to demonstrate an ethos of feminist connection, often to the point of minimizing the dissension, egotism, myopia, discrimination, and competitiveness that also exist among women. Lacy’s feminist/redressive performances, consequently, cannot avoid being

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haunted by the specters of essentialism. I must note that Lacy herself has dismissed the debate on essentialism as a theoretical issue that has divided the feminist community. She tersely disputes that no artist she knows uses essentialism to describe her/his theoretical position and contends that the label has been acrimoniously coined by anti-essentialist critics.[5] As evinced in her feminist art, Lacy’s primary concern lies in taking seriously the collective identity of women—and, for that matter, of other groups—who are subject to specific forms of discrimination. She aims to mobilize, through such complex collectivity, diverse other subjects to act toward positive social change.

Although Lacy left L.A. in the late 1980s, her nearly two decades’ contribution to the performance culture in the city cannot be overestimated. The scope of Lacy’s achievements is inspiring in its persistence, multiplicity, and singleminded conviction. As she maintains, contemporary artists interested in socially relevant art practice often have to play multiple roles in a spectrum of fluid identities: as an experiencer, a reporter, an analyst, and an activist. In developing art strategies to interact with her diverse audience constituencies, Lacy has realized the potential of intermedia artists to be public intellectuals, reinterpreting Marcel Duchamp’s assertion in 1917 that to be an artist is not just to produce visual objects for “retinal” pleasure but “to rethink the world and remake meaning through language.”[6] Lacy has succeed in creating a hybrid form of conceptual art practice that mixes aesthetic performance, community activism, and feminist politics with theoretical analysis, translating “the dematerialization of art as object” into “its rematerialization in the world of ideas.”[7]

An Ethos of Connection

Lacy’s diverse projects have left L.A. a legacy that affirms the potential of feminist performance as a strategy for sociocultural intervention, an instrument for personal empowerment, and a vehicle for community formation. Lacy herself has coined the term “new genre public art” to contextualize her work—specifically to distinguish her large-scale public performances from more traditional public art that centers around permanent installation of a sculptural object. In Mapping the Terrain (1995), Lacy defines “new genre public art” as “visual art that uses both traditional and nontraditional media to communicate and interact with a broad and diversified audience about issues directly relevant to their lives.”[8] Here she clearly names the discipline of visual art as the terrain of her activist art, in this way differentiating her performance art from the more theatricalized incarnations of this mixed medium in the 1980s and 1990s. Indeed, Lacy’s performance art has taken many forms other than that of theater.

Whatever the form, I argue that Lacy’s feminist art both precedes and exemplifies

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the exploration of multiculturalism in performance, for her genderbased coalition politics anticipates some of the goals put forth by multiculturalism. Mapping the Terrain, for
example, offers an exploration of multiculturalism as a (potentially efficacious) redressive politics mobilized around minority rights. The book includes essays by Guillermo Gómez-Peña, a proponent and critic of multiculturalism, and Judith F. Baca, the eminent Chicana artist whose ongoing mural project, the Great Wall of Los Angeles (1976–), is often cited as a strong example of multicultural art. New genre public art, in spirit if not in name, carries on the promises of multiculturalism, but it frames the practice of relevant art in the interest of an amorphous entity called “the public.” By realigning her art as one for public interest, Lacy displaces the imprecise binarism between the supposed monocultural norm and multicultural others.

As I indicated earlier, Lacy's own brand of new genre public art bears the imprints of two strains of redressive performance: the Judy Chicago school of feminist art that repudiates the patriarchal repression of female subjectivity and the Allan Kaprow school of an art/life continuum that objects to the modernist injunction for aesthetic autonomy. Lacy adopts feminist politics without reservation, extending the sex/race/class activism that had rocked the United States in the 1960s. She nevertheless revises Kaprow's playful proposal of un-arting. While embracing Kaprow's anti-elitist tendency for the democratization of art, she shifts his apolitical and sex-blind emphasis to underline the purposive fusion between aesthetics and politics.

In her essay “Affinities: Thoughts on an Incomplete History,” Lacy identifies two prominent themes in the collective politics of feminist art in the 1970s: “[t]he investigation of gender identity and the relationship of art practice to public life.” She further traces the reasoning behind these two themes to “the longing for distinctions” and “the longing to connect.” I recognize these two “longings” as the affective impetus behind the more abstract self/other dynamics that Lacy's performances address: the former motivates the inquiry into self-identity, and the latter propels the search for others who may meet the self's need for relevance, sustenance, and community. Although I observe both introspective and proactive impulses in her art, I believe what distinguishes Lacy's feminist project is her indefatigable contemplation and practice of the ethos of connection. Her search for affinities among different others is driven by this ethos, which is both a dialectic force and an activist stance challenging the essentialist assumption of a static essence within the self or a preexisting kinship among similar others. This commitment to connection locates Lacy's performative exploration of selfhood in the unfixed, contingent, and negotiating space of intersubjective relations. It partially explains why Lacy's public art has increasingly expanded in scale, joining together more and more others. Over the years she has developed a multivalent approach to redressive performance that might well be called the Lacy school.

The Politics of Marginality

Lacy grounds her connective art firmly in the feminist context, maintaining that “[in] the feminist view, art could express the self in a metaphorical encounter with the other.” This assertion of the self/other pairing pays homage to a seminal text that stands at the forefront of the second wave of the women's movement: The Second Sex by Simone de Beauvoir, which Lacy cites as an important influence on her feminist art. Amelia Jones has noted that Beauvoir's book was the first to expose the gendered specificity of the self/other formulation in the Western patriarchy.
The gravity of Beauvoir's argument centers around the famous dictum that opens Book Two of *The Second Sex*: “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine.”[14] This passage, as Sonia Kruks holds, goes a long way toward undermining the notion of subjectivity endorsed by the Enlightenment, because it tacitly challenges the existence of a stable, coherent, fully autonomous and rational individual. [15] By stressing the force of social construction in naturalizing “gender,” Beauvoir questions the concept of the self modeled on the Cartesian *cogito* and offers a rather more complex view by situating the subject in what Stephen Horton describes as “the tension-ridden ‘spaces’ between freedom and the social influences around her or him.”[16] Consequently, as Kruks continues, Beauvoir is able to “both acknowledge the weight of social construction, including gender, in the formation of the self and yet refuse to reduce the self to an ‘effect’. She can grant a degree of autonomy to the self—as if necessary in order to retain such key notions as political action, responsibility, and the oppression of the self—while also acknowledging the real constraints on autonomous subjectivity produced by an oppressive situation.”[17]

Beauvoir's challenge to the universalized notion of the (disembodied) Enlightenment subject gains significance in the light of her exposure of the built-in dichotomy between the male and the female sex. According to Beauvoir, the patriarchal culture assigns a fixed hierarchy to the pair, assuming the male sex to be the norm and the female sex its derivative:

Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being…. And she is simply what man decrees, thus she is called “the sex,” by which is meant that she appears essentially to the male as a sexual being. For him she is sex—absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other.[18]

Precise as her analysis is, I nevertheless find that Beauvoir speaks in the voice of an unsexualized, neutral subject, secured in her authorial prerogative as the “essential” and “absolute.” Since she leaves no room for self-reflexivity, the quoted passage curiously pivots around a male/humanist perspective. Although Beauvoir does announce early on in her book that, if she wishes to define herself, she must first of all say: “I am a woman,” she proceeds as if such an identity had no bearing on how she perceives, rationalizes, and produces discourse on women's condition. Beauvoir writes, as Nicole Ward Jouve observes, as if she were not a woman—“She is no longer down among the women, she's escaped the condition.”[19] Or rather, as Beauvoir herself divulges, she reasons in the image/position of what she calls “the ‘modern’ woman,” who “accepts masculine values: she prides herself on thinking, taking action, working, creating, on the same terms as men; instead of seeking to disparage them, she declares herself their equal.”[20] Beauvoir's uncritical self-assurance leads Mary Evans to criticize “her tacit assumption that paid work and contraception are the two keys to the absolute freedom of womankind, [which] suggested a set of values that place a major importance on living like a childless, rather singular, employed man.”[21]

As Beauvoir conceives it, the project of liberation for women lies not in investigating how sexual specificity might empower an individual, but in denying that “woman (whatever the culture, civilisation, education, or world structures) can never be the same as man.”[22] This
insistence on the nonsexualized equivalence of consciousness between men and women explains Beauvoir's suspicion of the category “woman.” Her suspicion does not come from a utopian denial of this category for an abject class; rather, it results from her revulsion against the supposed female essence implicated by the category: “To decline to accept such notions as the eternal feminine, the black soul, the Jewish character, is not to deny that Jews, Negroes, women exist today—this denial does not represent a liberation for those concerned, but rather a flight from reality.”[23] Beauvoir herself must have striven to ground her analysis on “reality,” yet her text suffers from an unproblematic employment of the very philosophical order that casts subjecthood as male.[24]

I am sympathetic with Beauvoir's desire to undermine the European patriarchy's gender construction and its myths of the eternal feminine (together with its hushed lamentation over its “haplessly” ethnic/racial other). In her attempt to discredit the traditional category “woman,” however, Beauvoir does not offer a corollary postulation about a spectrum of transgendered individuals—as some of the poststructuralist queer theorists have done.[25] I see her overall argument as characterized by two disturbing tendencies, which seem impervious to such a prospect of diversity: (1) her reasoning is largely locked inside the vision of one posed as the essential, one-sexed male/self; and (2) she absolutely disavows the role that embodied sexual difference might play in an ineluctably gendered individual's self-formation. Beauvoir's strategy may have exposed how the Western patriarchy maintains its sovereignty; but, I am afraid, it also reinstates the patriarchy's erasure and devaluation of the differences in the female-sexed corporeality.

Beauvoir's adherence to the very patriarchal value system that her work critiques is revealed in her acceptance of the predetermined asymmetry between (male-identified) One/Self and (female-identified) Other. To her, the One is necessarily superior to the Other. She does not entertain the possibility that the One's putative superiority might be vulnerable at certain moments and the Other's supposed inferiority might be merely a historical vestige, as arbitrary as the category of the second sex itself. Beauvoir's inherited system of valuation is clear in the following passages:

No subject will readily volunteer to become the object, the inessential; it is not the Other who, in defining himself as the Other, establishes the One. The Other is posed as such by the One in defining himself as the One….

To decline to be the Other, to refuse to be a party to the deal—this would be for women to renounce all the advantages conferred upon them by their alliance with the superior caste. Man-the-sovereign will provide woman-the-liege with material protection and will undertake the moral justification of her existence…. Indeed, along with the ethical urge of each individual to affirm his subjective existence, there is also the temptation to forgo liberty and become a thing. This is an inauspicious road, for he who takes it—passive, lost, ruined—becomes henceforth the creature of another's will, frustrated in his transcendence and deprived of every value.[26]

The patriarchal valuation, which Beauvoir effectively reinscribes, constructs the One as the active subject, the universal and transcendent pronoun “he,” who is in absolute control over the (feminized) Other. The Other, in contrast, is passive, inessential, and immanent, necessarily lost and ruined. With the One and the Other reified in their uppercase fixity, Beauvoir's theory precludes other permutations of self/other relations: a subject may see
her/himself as the one and/or the other simultaneously or at different moments; a subject (out of compassion, empathy, curiosity, perversity) may volunteer to be an object, or an other, for the sake of other subjects; a subject may recognize her/his predetermined status as an other, a marginalized subject, yet seek to affirm the partial autonomy, relative strength, and manifest difference of being an other. Moreover, such values as independence, subjectivity, transcendence, and universality, which Beauvoir elucidates as the privileged attributes of the One, are not inherently superior to their theoretical others: codependency, intersubjectivity, immanence, and particularity. To recognize one's status as an other, or even one's innate otherness, I argue, may also have potentially liberating or invigorating effects. This recognition turns “otherness” into a positive, identificational ingredient rather than an existential negativity, always already presumed detrimental to the self.

If to be the one is to be centered, then to be the other is to have the advantage and/or to know the disadvantage of being decentered and uncentered— that is, of being an edge as well as being edged. Yet, as I argued in Chapter 1, centering and decentering are not necessarily mutually exclusive, an “othered” one may just as well find validity or locate her/his provisional centrality in the (all but temporary) margin. A marginalized other may contest power from the (constantly oscillating) periphery and practice a politics of marginality that inverts the preexisting hierarchy of values. S/he may prefer the volatility of being an other/self over the strict sovereignty obligatorily assumed by the One.

Lacy herself has not explicitly related the self/other motif to center/margin dynamics. I contend, however, that the politics of marginality offers an astute angle for viewing her feminist politics, which follow an ethos of connection that collapses the supposed division between self and other and deliberately inverts the masculocentric value system. This politics of marginality is shared by many other subjects, all coming from what we might call the multicultural contingency, including ethnic minority, gay and lesbian, and other socially marginalized artists. As we shall see, the politics of marginality frequently deploys otherness strategically, whether this otherness derives from the artists' own sociocultural status, from their chosen cultural affiliations, or from the “deviant” qualities of their subject matter and modes of presentation.

The politics of marginality benefits from Beauvoir's exposure of the patriarchal schema, although it radically erodes her inherited masculocentric valuation. Demonstrated in the corporeally charged live performance undertaken by subaltern subjects, the politics of marginality not only upsets the morphological stability between center and margin, but disowns the masculocentric devaluation of the other/female/body/flesh, a conceptual coinage that cannot be fully intelligible without Beauvoir's important work. Here, my compounding of other/female is indebted to her en/gendering of the Other as female—punning on “engendering” (giving birth) and “en-gendering” (attributing a gender). My melding of “other/female” with “body/flesh”

recalls another implication in Beauvoir's analysis: what Judith Butler describes as the patriarchal assumption that connects femininity with immanence and corporeality, or, in Amelia Jones's recounting, “the masculine project of dis embodiment by which men transcend their bodies by projecting their otherness (their immanence, their contingent corporeality) onto women.”[27]
Butler's observation recapitulates Beauvoir's tacit equations between *otherness* and other supposedly abject attributes, including *femininity* (being female), *subjugation* (being other), *corporeality* (being body), and *objecthood* (being flesh). Nevertheless, I reiterate my doubt that all these attributes are necessarily overdetermined by the preexisting hierarchy of values. For the politics of marginality practiced by some subaltern artists, including Lacy, has effectively inverted such hegemonic value systems. I would therefore rewrite Beauvoir's self/other paradigm to expand its conceptual possibilities for the politics of marginality.

To be an *other/self* is to be an *en/gendered body/flesh*—both born and gendered (made male or female) by the (hegemonic) One, both a body/subject and a flesh/object. To deploy otherness as a performative trope, then, requires the artist to move her/his *other/self* into action by literally taking up, putting forth, or laying down her/his body/flesh. In this sense, body art—being an extreme performance genre that utilizes the artist's body as simultaneously an animated corporeal body/subject and a sentient if inert flesh/object—may well be a powerful strategy for those artists who perceive or identify themselves as (non-normative) other subjects. To practice their politics of marginality, these artists frequently enlist their own bodies as at once the performing subjects (the ones) and performative objects (the othered selves), stressing their own double status as artistic subjects and subaltern individuals. In this politicized context, the use of the artist's body is essentially *strategic*. This strategic convenience may account for many feminist artists' obsessive and recurrent use of their bodies in performance, a trend which Lacy has joined and which has also been a prime target for anti-essentialist critique.\[28\]

**Lacy's Feminist Body Art**

Lacy began exploring the self/other paradigm within the visible and invisible domains of her embodied self: her female-sexed and -gendered body.\[29\] This intimate turn to the body was far from exceptional, given the preponderance of body art performances and the emergence of the feminist personal/political ur-theme in the 1970s. As Lacy maintains in her essay “The Name of the Game” (1991), the use of the body in art fit the feminist project for “collective redefinition,” challenged the cultural “censorship” of people hitherto “not allowed access to self-representation,” and tapped into this material site as “an important source of information.”\[30\] Lacy's own performative engagement with her body features a particular blending of clinical and visceral propensities, perhaps a result of her pre-med training.

Between 1973 and 1976 Lacy produced a series of performative photographs entitled *The Anatomy Lessons*. The series documents Lacy's various actions to consume otherness: through eating, butchering, and symbolic disembowelment. With humorous explicitness, these “over-exposed” images show Lacy eating different parts (wing, arm, breast, leg) of a chicken in *Chickens Com ing Home to Roost, for Rose Mountain and Paulene*, utilizing parts of a lamb carcass to lecture on *Learn Wherethe Meat Comes From*, and wearing a bathing suit featuring internal organs (fig. 10).\[31\] *The Anatomy Lessons* vividly questions the conventionally assumed rigid boundary between selfhood and otherness, explicated by Beauvoir's critique. The eating of a chicken and the partition of a lamb both comment on the fluent exchange of tissues between self and other through injection, digestion, and discharge. The female figure showcasing her guts echoes Beauvoir's disclosure of woman as the degraded—and here, gutsy—Other; it also alludes to the medical knowledge that one's body is always partially an other to oneself. Lacy's body is then both anatomically classified as female and clinically signaled
as a human specimen, a flesh sample laden with auto-governing organs. Her body is, in this light, an innate other/self, for it is simultaneously part of her self and her self's inborn other.

According to Lacy, *The Anatomy Lessons* primarily concerns the human body's status as *mortal* rather than *gendered*. She argues that, because of her less “voluptuous” physique, her body could appear as “neutral” rather than specifically female.\(^{32}\) I agree that mortality is a foregrounded issue in *The Anatomy Lessons*, but I question Lacy's claim of her body's neutral status based on its perceived distance—less “voluptuous”—from a normatively assumed “female body.” Such a claim for corporeal neutrality, I believe, tacitly confirms the male body—which is statistically less voluptuous than most female bodies—as the universal (hence neutral and non-gender-specific) standard for human body. I do not deny that the male body is indeed reified by the patriarchal tradition as the “universal standard” of humanity. Nevertheless, I regard the most extraordinary achievement of *The Anatomy Lessons* as the artist's double stance to both evoke and invert this universal standard without denying her own female anatomy. This series of Lacy's bodyworks, then, avers that a specifically *female* body such as her own *can* serve as the universal standard of humanity.

From my perspective, *The Anatomy Lessons* employs Lacy's body as both a particular and a general human specimen, vacillating between the artist's own *gender specificity* and what may be called her *species-specific* corporeal otherness. Her body is her innate other/self because (1) she lacks visual access to a
large portion of her torso; (2) she cannot control or fully comprehend most of her inner organs, somatic networks, and psychic strata; (3) she is able to function most efficiently when her body recedes from her awareness and becomes virtually “absent”;[33] (4) her body ages and dies a bit every minute in spite of her self-will. I suggest that this transgendered condition of corporeal otherness becomes doubly so when the body is anatomically female and has potential reproductive capacity. The female body literally incorporates a foreign other inside the self during gestation. Lacy graphically depicts this othercarrying condition of the maternal body in her Anatomy Lesson #4: Swimming, which features her floating on water, her nude body laid open with intestines, uterus, and branchlike blood vessels flowing from her abdomen (fig. 11).

The image of an eviscerated female figure points to an aesthetic of the “grotesque,” which is, according to Mikhail Bakhtin, a carnivalesque tendency that revels in the functioning of the body'slower stratum—the stomach, bowels, and genitals.[34] Sally Banes has historicized the prevalence of “the effervescent, grotesque body” as a trope in New York's performance art in the 1960s:

The effervescent, grotesque body is seen as literally open to the world, blending easily with animals, objects, and other bodies. Its boundaries are permeable; its parts are surprisingly autonomous; it is everywhere open to the world. It freely indulges in excessive eating, drinking, sexual activity, and every other imaginable sort of licentious behavior. And it is precisely by means of the image of this grotesque body of misrule that unofficial culture has poked holes in the decorum and hegemony of official culture.[35]

As a strategy to subvert the strict and sanitized “official culture,” the effervescent, grotesque body featured prominently in 1970s feminist performances. Lacy's own plunge into this theme joined other feminist artists' revisionary confrontation with an art tradition that has both idealized woman's body as an erotic object of beauty and denied women their right to artistic subjectivity. This masculocentric tradition both worships ideal womanhood in the image of a classical—graceful, well-proportioned, clean, demure, and still—female body and relegates
women to the “second sex” precisely for their corporeality. Critiquing this established art tradition, *The Anatomy Lessons* presents a woman who claims her artistic subjectivity by engaging her female-gendered body in mundane conduct and grotesque self-exposure. This type of feminist self-representation, as Lacy notes, attends to a tri-partite procedure: (1) it recognizes “the political nature of imagery,” (2) it capitalizes on “the power that comes with the right to name and describe,” and (3) it aspires to “an imaginative revision of the [patriarchal] status quo.” Thus, censorious critique is not the sole purpose of Lacy’s feminist body art, which also aims to constructively invert—if only nominally—the patriarchal devaluation of corporeality/femininity.

In an interview with Moira Roth, Lacy associates the image of her grotesque self-portraiture in *Swimming* with giving birth and with women's spirituality, stating that “women's spirituality is rooted in the physical and that women will transcend through the body.” This statement divulges Lacy's effort to recuperate “the body” for women and her conscious challenge to the Christian binarism between the (eternal) spirit and the (ephemeral) flesh. Although I am not convinced that a woman's body is her messiah, nor do I agree that transcendence is every woman's aspiration, I endorse Lacy's attempt at retrieving the cultural valence of once-relegated concepts and her feminist investment in disrupting hegemonic assumptions. I am especially intrigued by Lacy's encoding of the birthing action onto *Swimming*. Since no infant is present in the photo, her parturition is visually linked with her visceral body, an other/self innate to her being. The image, then, presents the prima facie evidence of a double-birth, evoking both *procreation* (begetting an other who is not-quite-self) and *self-generation* (begetting an/other self). Through such doubleness, *Swimming* rewrites maternity as the *autogenesis* of Lacy's artistic subjectivity. Aside from such joyous feminist affirmation, the image of a disemboweled corpus is a forceful reminder of the violence endured by this mortal body. The always imminent presence of death thus reveals its eruptive persistence even with the very signing of one's birth certificate.

The bodyworks enacted and photographed for *The Anatomy Lessons* revisit Kaprow's thesis of art/life blending by including quotidian behaviors (such as eating) alongside more displaced art actions (such as simulating a grotesque gut-birth/death). Contrary to Kaprow's preference for un-arting, however, Lacy studiously constructs her own artistic subjectivity as a woman artist, while framing her body art practice as an inquiry into her gender identity. Her feminism lies in this insistence on foregrounding her own gender specificity as the rationale and focus of her art. Although Lacy takes her gender identity as a given, she does not automatically accept the preexisting sociocultural restrictions placed on this gender; rather, she strives to transgress its limits, redefine its possibilities, and enrich its lived reality. Her feminist art amounts to a transgressive redefinition of the female gender assignation.

As I observed earlier, Lacy uses her own body as both a specifically gendered material property and a universal sample of human physiology. This insistence on both the particularity (that which belongs to her individually) and the universality (that which belongs to the human collective) of her female body provocatively reverses the hegemonic norm. Whereas the patriarchy traditionally values universality over particularity, Lacy's feminist art rejects that assumption to use the artist's gender identity as an enabling grounding. The hegemonic standard may raise her gender particularity to disqualify her claim to a universal knowledge about the human body. Subverting this androcentric ideology, Lacy demonstrates her corporeal universality despite her gender. Further, by foregrounding her body's innate corporeal otherness, she poses her own universal humanness as the very material limit that
compromises her comprehension of the body/subject. Unlike the traditional authoritative male subject, Lacy cites her corporeal universality as a self-critical qualifier rather than a proof of her aptness in knowing her male others. In fine, she flips the dominant value hierarchy: her anatomical particularity confirms her gender identity as female and her self-identity as a feminist artist, while her physiological universality exposes her lack of full access to and coherent control over her body/self.

Through *The Anatomy Lessons*, which plays off the dynamic of self/other dynamics within the artist's individual body, Lacy both delineates the sphere of competence and responsibility for her feminist art and admits to the elusive otherness within her selfhood. Thus, she marks her artistic agency more in terms of devotion and accountability than absolute authority.

In her subsequent feminist bodyworks, Lacy poses her gender identity as the gauge by which she measures other transgendered corporeal experiences. Her redressive performances focus especially on issues of aging, which is both a physiological and a sociocultural factor that tends to intensify an individual's perception of otherness. Lacy expands her corporeal encounter with otherness

![Image](image.png)


by venturing into experiential territories manifestly different from her own. Her performative journey into those other territories resembles a psychic and physical pilgrimage, through which her body traverses the secret spheres of otherness. As Roth maintains, the core of Lacy's work resides in her “dual need to both experience and become one with ‘the other.’”[38] Lacy embodies otherness, juxtaposing her self with the images of others to test whether and how these images might affect and alter her body/self during performance. Between 1976 and 1978 Lacy staged a series of performances about older women to enact her next cycle of self/other investigations. Some of these performances were private and extensive in duration; others were public and demonstrative, including several nonart occasions—conferences or panel discussions—where Lacy made “appearances” as an elderly woman.[39]

In *Inevitable Associations* (1976), a Hollywood makeup artist transforms Lacy into the image of an old woman while she sits in a red chair for three hours in the lobby of the Biltmore Hotel in downtown L.A. (fig. 12).[40] Ten older women then greet the made-old Lacy by clothing her in a black dress, similar to what they are wearing. Lacy returns to the Biltmore the next day to direct the second part of the piece, in which three elderly women, dressed as
themselves, talk about their experiences of aging within three big circles of spectators, who are mostly younger women and men.

Inevitable Associations joins together different entities by their thematic or affective associations within the given historical and urban context: the old Biltmore Hotel, which had just undergone a full-scale “face-lift”; the Hollywood industry that has turned cosmetic surgery into a survival kit for older, and especially female, stars; the general perceptions of older women as undesirable or unsightly objects; the artist's indignation at this existing discrimination and her compulsion to demonstrate emotional solidarity with these older women by taking on their abject sociocultural status. Inevitable Associations redresses such seldom-scrutinized sexist ageism by fusing all these elements in a live collage that goes against the grain: Lacy stages a self-aging performance inside the Biltmore Hotel lobby and invites numerous older women as her costars to witness a process in which the leading lady becomes progressively older via Hollywood's magical cosmetic technology. Aside from the symbolic critique on ageism, this performance also produces some practical benefits for its senior participants, who feel momentarily empowered by joining an art performance that remedies their cultural invisibility and perennial silence.

Lacy completes her cycle of self-aging performances with several other pieces. In 1976 Lacy stages Edna, May Victor, Mary and Me: An All Night Benediction in a private room in L.A.'s Hilton Hotel during the College Art Association conference. The all-night performance is transmitted live to all hotel rooms at the Hilton, with TV instructions that flash intermittently, recommending viewers to “sleep if you must, but please stay tuned.” During this extended vigil, Lacy, again made up to look like an old woman, sits among memorabilia from Edna, a senior friend, while listening to the taped conversations of Edna with her friends May Victor and Mary. Periodically, Lacy covers up and uncovers a large lamb carcass lying on the bed. As dawn breaks, Lacy trades places with the lamb. In The Lady and the Lamb (1978), performed at Mills College in Oakland, Lacy appears as an old woman, wearing a hat and gloves and clutching a handbag. She moves clumsily while cradling a lamb's bandaged carcass in her arms.

If Inevitable Associations enables Lacy to demonstrate her solidarity with older women and to test how the public interacts with her differently when her appearance ages, then Edna turns this demonstration inward, binding the artist in a meditative state for a prolonged duration. The piece's subtitle indicates that Lacy regards this experiment as a benediction, a blessing by the voices and memories of her older friends. The act of simulating an aged physiognomy allows the artists to measure the affective changes that might take place within her body/self and to taste prematurely the “mystery” of being old. Lacy further intensifies her experience's visual, tactile, and visceral impacts by incorporating a lamb carcass. In both Edna and Lady, the lamb functions as an other to Lacy and an imagistic double for her self.

The lamb carcass, a recurrent imagery in Lacy's bodyworks, was first introduced in Lamb Construction (1973) performed at the Woman's Building. The use of a lamb carcass and other animal blood and entrails in her early works, as Lacy once mentioned, expressed her interest in “the macabre, the underbelly of society, the dark side of life.” Apart from her private fascination, the symbolism of the lamb of course has a strong Christian resonance. In the
Book of Isaiah, the person anointed by the Lord to carry the mortal grief and bear the wounds of human transgressions is compared to a lamb, humble and meek:

… he hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him… and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

… All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearsers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth. (Isaiah 53:7)

Lacy's use of the animal imagery, having revised the universal male gender in the biblical text, turns the lamb into a multivalent symbol of collective sacrifice (one brought to the slaughter), mute victim (she who opens not her mouth), and abject creature (she who is desired and esteemed by none). In Learn Where the Meat Comes From, the lamb carcass is edible dead meat; in both Edna and Lady, the lamb carcass symbolizes the vulnerability, loneliness, subjection, and confinement that an old woman might experience when she confronts the effects of aging and the prospect of death. In contrast to the skinless lamb or its mummified carcass, Lacy wears the visible characteristics of aging, taking on—as it were—an old woman's excess skin. She voluntarily bears the inscriptions of a mortal being's ultimate Other, Time, not to repel its constant assault, but to prognosticate its cumulative impressions upon her future body/self.

Lacy's self-aging performances turn her body/subject into the corporeal receiver and filter through which pass different affective and cognitive stimuli provoked by her impersonation. These bodily acquired lessons then become dispersed and lodged in her self as intuitive knowledge about the other she embodies. By immersing her body/self in an/other flesh environment, Lacy pursues an underlying premise that amounts to a perceptual/conceptual syllogism: through (self) experience comes an understanding of the other; through this newly gained (self) understanding comes an empathy with the other; through such altruistic but also self-informed empathy comes responsibility toward the other. All told, her self's embodied experience of otherness inspries a sense of responsibility toward the other. She fulfills this responsibility with her activist art, which is explicitly committed to other subjects, like as well as unlike her self.

Body, Female, Essential Strategy

While her dedication to feminism is admirable, Lacy's emphasis on her body as a means of probing her gender identity triggers a contentious issue in the essentialism debate. According to Naomi Schor, “an essentialist in the context of feminism is one who, instead of carefully holding apart the poles of sex and gender, maps the feminine onto femaleness, one for whom the body, the female body that is, remains, in however complex and problematic a way, the rock of feminism.” [44] Lacy's self-aging trilogy, which enlists her body as a vehicle to experience other women's predicaments, places a heavy weight on the female body as an instrument for feminism. She seemingly desires to read her own body like a piece of writing, rearranging the “syntactic” structures (wearing makeup to look aged) on her surface body in order to detect any “semantic” changes (sensations of aging) from her visceral and psychic body. She also affirms her affinity with other women—across age, class, race, or other
differences—by resorting to the anatomical similarities of their female bodies. In short, Lacy understands femaleness or femininity, along with (the nongender-specific) mortality, by deciphering her own body as a text. In this respect, her corporeal methodology tampers with essentialism.

As Ellen Rooney maintains, “The body is of course essentialism's great text: to read in its form the essence of Woman is certainly one of phallocentrism's strategies; to insist that the body too is materially woven into social (con)texts is anti-essentialism's reply.” Rooney agrees with Schor on the role of the female body in essentialism. Yet I find her argument misleading to the extent that she links essentialism with phallocentrism, which implies that anti-essentialism, as a theoretical repudiation of essentialism/phallocentrism, emerges to contest the latter's reduction of women to their female-sexed bodies. I counter that, as Lacy exemplifies, there are feminists who oppose phallocentrism but maintain certain essentialist positions to base gender identity and coalition politics on a specifically sexed body. Similarly, there are anti-essentialists who fundamentally question the cause of feminism.

To retain Rooney's insight, I would rephrase her useful summation: Essentialism tends to locate the essence of a woman in her female-sexed body and to read from this body's anatomy, morphology, erotic, and reproductive properties the significance and consequence of her womanhood. These corporeally invested knowledges about the female body are then construed to be the foundation for a gender-based coalition, which helps women confront sexist violence and oppression. Anti-essentialism vehemently contests this body-oriented epistemology as biological determinism and rejects any sighting of the body as a material “proof” for a certain female essence that exists prior to linguistic/symbolic/social constructions. Judged by the anti-essentialist logic, it is theoretically unsophisticated to try to generalize an immutable essence (such as “genuine womanhood” or “maternal nature”) from a discursively constructed entity (such as “the body”).

I understand how myopic it is to reduce a multiplicitous and complex movement like feminism to a single position—essentialist or not. For the sake of argument, I focus on some particular feminist presuppositions to which Lacy's art is akin, without asserting that these presuppositions are shared by all feminists. Lacy's emphasis on the inevitable associations among women suggests that she perceives women's sexual difference and their generally lesser physical stature as (unjust) causes for malicious treatment. Her feminist art strives to emancipate those assigned to the female gender and those unfairly persecuted due to their different bodies. Insofar as she identifies certain persistent qualities from these oppressed bodies, Lacy's feminism may be considered a type of essentialism. For a typical anti-essentialist position holds that neither gender nor such an ostensibly materialist entity as a sexed (or raced) body exists beyond the fabrication/construction of a particular sociocultural system in a given historical period.

A strong version of anti-essentialist critique, for example, appears in Michel Foucault's theory of sexuality, which radically questions the category of “sex” and the binary restriction on gender. Following Judith Butler's illuminating explication, we know that Foucault understands the category of “sex” and sexual difference as “regulative” systems produced by the hegemonic power/knowledge regime: “To be sexed, for Foucault, is to be subjected to a set of social regulations, to have the law that directs those regulations reside both as the formative principle of one's sex, gender, pleasures, and desires and as the hermeneutic principle of self-interpretation.” To expose that sex is not a physical certainty but a political
construction, Foucault proposes “sexuality” as “an open and complex historical system of discourse and power that produces the misnomer of ‘sex’ as part of a strategy to conceal and, hence, to perpetuate power-relations.” I find Foucault's theory of sexuality ingenious and persuasive. Most important, Foucault's nullification of sex as a category and his substitution of that regulative system with an amorphous nonidentity called sexuality have the effect of uncovering the existing sexual heterogeneity that has been unduly suppressed by the binary sex/gender assignation. But, I contend, his theory of sexuality must be understood not as the “truth” about the falsity of sexual categorization or gender identity but as an other historically specific discourse that serves his own implicit political purpose:

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to repudiate the claim that heterosexuality is more “natural,” “normal,” or “biologically based” than is homosexuality, because both are equally discursive constructions. In this light, Foucault's insistence on sexual nonidentity is as much a political strategy as is, say, Lacy's feminist affirmation of gender identity to base her counterhegemonic insurgence. His anti-essentialist critique is then no more valid or superior than her “essentialist” belief in the pertinence of sexual difference and biological specificity to an individual's self-formation.

Whether essentialist or not, Lacy's bodyworks cannot be separated from her political investment as an other/feminist subject. To me, her feminist body art functions as a conceptual inversion of the hegemonic binarism that has polarized men and women, self and other, mind and body, spirit and flesh, art and life, aesthetics and politics, theory and practice, reasoning and experience— with cultural privilege regularly given to the former entity in each pairing. Lacy's strategy of displaying her body caught in an equivocal tension between its anatomical specificity and corporeal generality aims not to reclaim the latter entities in the binary as superior, but to expose that these dichotomized entities are inextricably connected. What I call her “conceptual inversion” lies in her decision to associate with the subjugated entities and to take them as her comprehensive signifiers for the new totality.

In Lacy's formulation of this connective totality, for example, the “body” subsumes the mind: it is always a mindful body and an embodied mind—a body/(mind). In more practical terms, Lacy takes her body as “a source of information” to study her own sociocultural position, to conceptualize her kinship with other women through their biological proximity and gender identity, to analyze the historical basis of their subordination as a sexualized and gendered class, and to locate an ethical and political impetus for their collective struggle. There is no innocent extraction of a mythical womanhood— preordained, transcendent, intrinsic, and immutable—from her avowedly female-sexed body; instead, she reconstructs her gender identity so as to turn it into an embodied and strategic grounding for a feminist alliance.

If any concession to a gender identity is essentialist, then Lacy's assumption of her embodied femininity serves to locate a “nominal” essence, which is, in Teresa de Lauretis's words, “a totality of qualities, properties, and attributes” that a feminist defines, envisages, and enacts for herself in the process of relating to other women. Lacy's search for a gender-based coalition is therefore “more a project” “than a description of existent reality”; she aspires to a connection among women, despite their existent diversity and contradictions. Lacy's avowal of an essential feminist identity resembles what Gaya-tri Spivak analyzes as “a strategic use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest.” Thus, Lacy summons her ethos of feminist
connection in the hope of upending gender hierarchy and overturning its corollary discriminatory systems.

**Expanding Self and Communal Others**

The ethos of connection that permeates Lacy's aesthetics presupposes a paradigmatic pairing between the artist and her others. This *connective ethi/thetics* (ethics + aesthetics) explains why Lacy values the performance medium, whose given structure of intersubjective exchange allows her to assess the self/other paradigm. In her photographic and private self performances, the “other” is at once internalized and projected. Arrested within those solitary events' atheatrical context, Lacy contemplates the import of selfhood and discovers that the self cannot exist, become intelligible, or create meaning without the other—the self, bound by its inherent corporeal otherness, depends on the other's differentiating being to name and consolidate its self-boundary. This understanding of self-formation admits to the self's radical lack of autonomy and sufficiency, for the other both sustains and is incorporated within the self. There is then no otherless self—even the solitary self is haunted by the material presence (the otherness-within) and the phantasmic projection of the other.

Lacy herself theorizes the self/other dynamics as a feminist topos that ultimately serves to propel “the transformation of the power differential between men and women.” In view of this collective political agenda, her solitary performances seem to be rehearsals for her actual entrance into the public realm, where “others” are no longer metaphors. Lacy nevertheless states that “there were no divisions between art based on identity investigations and art that explored new relationships with its audience.”[50] This statement implies that Lacy attributes equal significance to the art of the private body (shaped by sexual particularity and gender identity) and the art of the public body (with incarnations in various social institutions and civic communities) because she has always located her self in the manifold meshing and clashing with others. The persistent awareness of existing others compels the artist to better recognize her body/self as a vehicle that initiates, makes, and maintains the connection.

Because of her propensity toward conceptual totality, Lacy tends to discover underlying unity in divergent phenomena. Thus, she treats her introspective bodyworks as inquiry into the most vital component of the performance medium: the audience, the collective other body who perceives, validates, questions, and interacts with the artist. She also interprets her public and collaborative performances as continuing her bodyworks, regarding her other-infused body/self as an instrument and evaluator of her self/other-linking art. Her holistic approach recalls Bakhtin's argument about the coexisting individual and collective dimensions in corporeal art: “Bodies could not be considered for themselves; they represent a material bodily whole and therefore transgressed the limits of their isolation. The private and the universal were still blended in a contradictory unity.”[51] This contradictory unity motivates what I call Lacy's ethi/thetics of connection, which finds the value and pleasure of art-making in uniting the artist and participatory others as volitional subjects in pursuit of collective goals.

Concurrent with her bodyworks, Lacy produced a series of collaborative public actions that redefined art-making as culture formation through the scale of involvement. These massive events demonstrated Lacy's talents as a charismatic teacher/leader, a meticulous organizer, and a resourceful social designer; they were also indebted to the cohesive feminist community in L.A. during the 1970s. As Lacy acknowledged, the effectiveness of these events “was
possible only in a city where the feminist community has reached the size and coherence to support the widespread recognition of a women's culture. These public performances illustrate various techniques developed in her self-aging events, such as site-specific associations (e.g., Hollywood image-making technology; impersonation based on analogous surfaces), public exposure (enacted in a hotel or college campus), and eye-catching visual symbolism (the lamb carcass). Most notably, these works have mobilized a great number of L.A. residents across the stratification of biocultural and socioeconomic differences to address issues of enormous urgency but with hitherto little public coverage.

Three Weeks in May (May 7–24, 1977), an activist event conceived and produced by Lacy under the auspices of the Studio Watts Workshop, the Woman's Building, and the City of Los Angeles, established a prototype for her subsequent public art projects. As the artist describes it, “the entire event structure” of this piece was “as much a model for possible action as it was an action in itself.” Lacy planned this “political art performance,” publicized as “a feminist organizational activity, designed to share information on women moving out of victimization,” as a response to the devastating record of L.A. as “Rape Capital of the Nation.” With citywide media exposure and community participation, Three Weeks in May was extensive in temporal duration, diverse in its participating personnel and audience constituencies, and multifaceted in the types of activities involved; spatially, it occupied all of L.A.

Three Weeks in May began on Sunday, May 7, 1977, with rituals of silent meditation called “Moment of Concern” in several churches throughout the city. The next three weeks saw a host of satellite events such as public forums, street performances, radio announcements, women's self-defense workshops, and personal rituals occurring around two 25-foot, yellow-painted maps of L.A. installed in the City Mall, located directly downstairs from the City Hall. Lacy collected daily reports of rape incidents from the Los Angeles Police Department and stamped the crime locations on one map in blocks of red-stenciled “rape.” Nine faint red demarcation dots were then added to each reported incident to represent the estimated number of assaults that were never reported. The other, “redressive” map listed the names, telephone numbers, and approximate locations of women's support agencies. A pointed visual device, the two maps simultaneously put L.A. on the spot as the site of sexual crimes and countered rape, a sexist mechanism of social control, with available public resources for self-defense, social action, exposure of crimes, and the post-traumatic convalescence of victims.

Lacy captured the gestalt of the event in a three-part performance entitled She Who Would Fly, which took place in the Garage Gallery of Studio Watts Workshop. The performance consists of a testimonial event in which Lacy listens to women who come to share their experiences of sexual violation and attach their stories on maps of the United States that cover the room; a private preparatory ritual between the artist and four performers, Nancy Angelo, Laurel Klick, Melissa Hoffman, and Cheryl Williams, all of whom had suffered from sexual assaults; and a one-day installation/performance open to the public for three or four people at a time. The installation (fig. 13) includes a striking tripartite structure: the four performers, naked, silent, and with their skin stained bright red, squatting out of sight on a ledge above the entryway; a winged lamb cadaver hanging from the ceiling; and a poem by Deena Metzger describing a sexual assault crudely inscribed on an asphalt-covered panel.
She Who Would Fly castigates brutality against women; the figure of the lamb cadaver whose wings fail to save it from deathly violence epitomizes the pathos of women under attack. Lacy describes the four naked figures as the “bird-women,” who are “metaphors for a woman’s consciousness which splits from her body as it is raped.”[55] She also suggests that, for her, the work's most important aspect is the moment when the audience members suddenly discover that they are being watched by these bird-women. Lacy's comments point to a performative power reversal between the nude women/art objects and the viewers/spectatorial subjects. Like the suspended lamb, the four performers, who signify all rape victims in the grip of extreme hardship, are reduced to catatonia. Yet they also forge their solidarity through a common rage. Since their elevated position affords them the privilege to stare at the audience from above, their fierce presence implicates the viewers as voyeurs of the pain of sexual victimization. Caught unprepared, the viewers are likely to experience the shock of being turned into voyeuristic objects themselves. This is the moment of theatrical reversal that the artist desires, one that symbolically transforms the performers from traumatized flesh/objects into accusatory subjects. In my opinion, however, an even more horrific implication comes from the fact that sexist violence continues to happen even as the viewers walk through the gallery reading testimonies on map-covered walls.

With its duration, locale, design, intention, scope, documentation, and media coverage, Three Weeks in May established a strong precedent of redressive performance that joins art with activism, public action with civic protest. The event brought into the open the suppressed issue of sexual violence against women. To treat such a theme within the given historical context...
context was often to polarize the oppressor and the oppressed along the gender divide. Lacy, however, adopted a more sophisticated relationship with the powers that be, staging her performance close to the City Hall and utilizing the mass-media industry: the mainstream newspapers and radio stations, the Hollywood TV and movie studios, those very institutions that have insidiously naturalized women's oppression as a state of inconsequence. Lacy did not spurn the media technologies for being phallocentric; instead, she took advantage of their populist potential—the power to reach more people—in order to create lasting impacts on her contemporary culture. To borrow from Lucy Lippard's comment in a different context: “Lacy confronts power with power.”

In the same year that Three Weeks in May was produced, Lacy collaborated with Leslie Labowitz to present another large-scale, highly publicized event entitled In Mourning and in Rage (December 1977), which again addresses the issue of gender violence. Drawing on Lacy's experience with community organizing and Labowitz's knowledge of media techniques, In Mourning and in Rage is framed as a public memorial service designed specifically to fit the terminology of media broadcasting. The centerpiece of this performance, staged in front of City Hall, is a feminist rally to mourn for recent victims of the Hillside Strangler rape murders and to protest against the media's sensationalization of those serial killings. Nine black-clad and black-veiled performers, transformed into giant figures by their headgear, stand as a monument of accusation and lamentation. Led by a woman in a scarlet robe symbolizing rage, these mourning figures are surrounded by women raising a huge banner that reads “In Memory of Our Sisters, Women Fight Back.” Performance participants intermittently reiterate this message in a choral refrain, “In memory of our sisters, we fight back!” A succession of mourners step forward to issue a brief statement using the microphone; their speeches are fashioned for easy quotation by the press and their solemn postures pausing against a tableau vivant of grief and anger are made-for-camera images. The information conveyed by these media-savvy devices is extremely disturbing. By the time the memorial ends, the numbers of women being mourned increase from the 10 victims of the Hillside Strangler to the 4,033 women who were reported raped in L.A. in 1976 alone.

Lacy's Multicultural Feminism

The two public performances organized by Lacy in 1977 culminated in highly visible tableaux vivants for media dissemination. Both pieces insisted on bringing the dreaded word “rape” into the national limelight and on exposing sexual violence against women as a problem of great frequency and magnitude. Alongside these publicized events, Lacy has also practiced her ethos of connection with less visible, community-oriented service art. She maintained a long-term (1975–83) fruitful relationship with low-income and elderly women in James Woods's Watts Community Housing Corporation, conducting art workshops with these mostly African American female participants and producing collaborative exhibitions and performances. The process of art-making is utilized in the Watts project to facilitate participants' selfunderstanding and interpersonal relations.

Immigrants and Survivors (1983) explores how women perceive such issues as immigration, racism, survival, individual identity, cultural assimilation, and various socially constructed barriers to a gender-based interconnection. Lacy collaborated with sponsoring organizations such as the Asian Pacific Women's Network, City Commission on the Status of Women, Comision Femenil Mexicana de Pasadena, and Women of Watts, and developed this piece as
a longterm community networking project that aimed to bring together a diverse group of L.A.-area women (close to 200) across their differences. Lacy adopted the format of potluck dinner discussions to create a cohesive force within this framework of multiplicity. As Lippard points out, the “potluck dinner format is a classically feminist collage. It brings together a highly disparate group of women and their culinary ‘offerings’ [to one another].” From the extended, half-year-long process in which participants exchanged their foods and stories emerged the metaphor that all women are immigrants to the patriarchal cultural establishment. Thus, despite the surface heterogeneity, their individual experiences all speak to the theme of women’s survival.

On June 18, 1983, as the culminating event of Immigrants and Survivors, a multiethnic group of women in L.A. gathers to have a citywide potluck dinner/performance. Participants include Salvadoran exiles, Japanese American musicians, Native American poets, African American gospel soloists, bank executives, domestic workers, teachers, prostitutes, athletes, lesbians, housewives, battered women, women with physical disabilities, and former inmates of psychiatric wards. A visceral geography of multicultural alliance among women is visually, aurally, and emotionally mapped by the diversity of diners, their accents and homemade dishes, and the performance offerings they share.

I find the spirit of this event captured in the brochure that each participant receives upon entrance: an elegant pamphlet modeled after the passport, made “official” by a colorless seal identifying the issuer as “Community of Women, Inc.” This feminist passport sports various “visa” stamps. The red oval stamp, with images of twin birds in flight, recognizes Lacy’s nonprofit art organization, She Who Would Fly, as a major endorser of the project. The green triangular stamp, with aliminal figure that crosses between an elephant's head (a matriarch's profile?) and a raised fist, indicates the project's three crucial components: immigrants, survivors, and women. The purple oblong stamp, with symmetrical icons of a train and a ship, certifies the dinner participants as legal immigrants with a triumphant message: ARRIVING IN OUR OWN LAND, 18 JUN 1983.

Through Lacy's feminist lens, Immigrants and Survivors tested the possibility of multiethnic and multicultural cooperation among women of diverse colors, creeds, and backgrounds long before the term “multiculturalism” gained widespread cultural currency in L.A. The Dark Madonna (1986), the next and incidentally also the last, large-scale project that Lacy organized for this city, happened at a moment when multiculturalism was gaining momentum in media and academic debates. In its idealistic guise, multicultural consciousness in art insists on bringing to the fore the pertinence of race in individual formation and the acknowledgment of diversity in cultural representation as responses to the changing demographics and cultural patterns in the United States. In my assessment, multicultural art commonly strives for two objectives: (1) to destabilize the taken-for-granted correlation between “culture” and the aesthetic, literary, epistemic, and performative norms endorsed by the Anglo American hegemony; and (2) to reclaim the concept of culture as both ethnic heritage and a free semiotic zone ready for multiple linguistic, cognitive, and imaginative reconstructions. The general rhetoric on multiculturalism—having displaced “race” with the broader term “culture”—champions unequivocally cultural diversity and political inclusionism, if it remains complicit and reticent about the issue of race. Lacy's own ethos of connection agrees with this egalitarian spirit of multiculturalism, even though she has chosen women's issues as the focus of her art. In her attempt to reach women of different races, classes, and generations, however, Lacy's feminism has always had a multicultural dimension.
What I might call Lacy's multi cultural feminism finds strong expression in *The Dark Madonna*, which considers the complex intersection of ethnic and sexual difference as a significant feminist agenda and frankly steps into the painful and explosive terrain of race.

The embryo for the project that would become *The Dark Madonna* was formed in a conversation between Lacy and Edith Tonelli, director of UCLA's Wight Art Gallery, in 1984. Considering that ethnic diversity had become the most distinctive feature of L.A., the two women decided to find, in Lacy's words, “a concept that would involve people from all over the community” by putting together “a performance of ordinary women.” Lacy eventually proposed a three-phase project that contained an academic conference, a process of community dialogues, and a large-scale performance pageant, all revolving around the concept of the Black Madonna, which she selected as the event's central icon for its evocative power in relation to gender, race, ethnicity, and spiritual expression.

Lacy conceived of *The Black Madonna* as a model project that would bring together various constituencies “to celebrate the historical representations and contemporary lives of ethnically diverse cultures in the City of Los Angeles” and to make “public the joint findings of community dialogue and of research in an effort to effect policies relevant to the needs and issues of ethnic minority and majority women.” The Black Madonna was renamed *The Dark Madonna* during the developmental process because of recommendations from Asian American and Chicana participants. The change, however, was challenged by an African American participant as a denial of the oldest known goddess, Isis, who was black and originated in Africa (Egypt). Another participant, of Scandinavian ancestry, defended the new title, suggesting that “‘dark’ encompasses both white and black.” Such a conflict of divergent viewpoints, as we shall see, proved to be a recurrent feature in this ambitious academy/community/art performance.

On November 8, 1985, the first phase of this massive project opens with a two-day symposium entitled “The Dark Madonna: Women, Culture and Community Rituals,” hosted by the newly established UCLA's Center for the Study of Women. It is designed to explore, according to the brochure, “goddesses and madonnas from different times and cultures, particularly figures representing women of color … and the contemporary meanings of female icons in multi-ethnic cultures and in women's lives.” To the organizers' surprise, the symposium receives an overwhelming response from the community (600 pre-registered) and draws an extremely diverse body of attendees, most of whom probably want to hear confirmations about their own versions of the Dark Madonna such as the Hindu Kali, the Mexican Virgin of Guadalupe, or the Asian Bodhisattva. The proceedings of the symposium, however, demonstrate how difficult it is to engage in multicultural negotiations.

A logogram of a Negroid-featured Madonna and child graces the symposium brochure. It seems a perfunctory homage to the conference theme, especially when the symposium's opening session presents six white women whose talks pay little reference to the Dark Madonna, despite containing much condemnation of racism. Other panels cover the nineteenth-century U.S. suffrage movement and the second wave of the women's movement in the 1960s, showing slides of upper-middle-class Caucasian women performing in rituals, tableaux, pageants, and performance art. By the end of the day, the audience members are confused and incensed; many attack the organizers
for their racial blindness. Karen Rowe, the center's director, explains that they have not attempted to balance each session but instead focused on balancing the symposium as a whole. She promises that there will be more discussions on women of color and panelists of all races. Finally, Lacy stands up to admit that the conference is flawed by “a strategic error and a deep political oversight,” reflected by the “racism evident in the choice of the panel,” and that it's important for the organizers to “acknowledge the criticism, react, and act.” Lacy also pleads with the audience “to stay and stand up.” And most of her listeners reciprocate by returning the second day.

If this symposium's first act falters under the weight of unintentional ethnocentrism, the second act fulfills its promise to display a picture of diversity not only in the knowledge conveyed but also in those who convey knowledge. As a religious icon, the Black Madonna is traced to Montserrat in Spain; to the Song of Solomon, which praises the daughters of Jerusalem as “black and comely”; to the alleged Sicilian belief that the Catholic Virgin Mary is African; and to “Buddhist images of the feminine that go beyond the maternal to represent perfection, wisdom, and bliss.” The Black Madonna, nicknamed *La Moreneta* (the dark one) by some faithful Catalans, is worshipped in many parts of Europe (Spain, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Italy, France) as mysterious, exotic, working wonders, and endowed with the power to ensure fertility and to lessen the pain of childbirth. Some of her icons are carved in ebony; some others, scholars have argued, have been blackened by centuries of votive candle smoke. In contemporary America, the Black Madonna is celebrated among African deities and Roman Catholic saints in Brazil; a darkskinned Indian Madonna has been sanctified in 1984 in Caracas, Venezuela. The Dark Madonna appears in California as the Mexican *Virgen de Guadalupe*, the symbol of the “good woman,” but also as her much maligned counterpart, *La Malinche*, the Indian woman sold into slavery who later served as Cortes's interpreter and mistress. The Dark Madonna's suggestive force is also associated with the attempts by African American writers, such as Alice Walker and Toni Morrison, to redefine God in the image of the black woman.

As Kathleen Hendrix observes, the symposium's overall message is encapsulated by the Jungian analyst Jean Shinoda Bolen's remark: “We've been told women are a group that has no history. We are reclaiming our history. We don't have to reinvent. We have to remember and reclaim the power that is within us. It is in those real dark nights of the soul. That's when you go down into the cave and discover the reality. You leave, still facing life in the morning, but strengthened by the experience in the dark.”

Bolen's emphases on remembrance, power, and survival echo Lacy's articulation of this project's themes as “ethnic heritage, strength and endurance.” While these motifs may sound too sacrosanct, this project's second phase, which proceeds through a series of community dialogues, pointedly grapples with the dark themes of racial discrimination, stereotypes, internalized oppression, shame, and life crisis. Positive notes are still accentuated: participants of this project are instructed to uncover the strengths underlying others' divulgence of their weaknesses.

The community component of *The Dark Madonna*, facilitated by Willow Young and Yolande Chambers Adelson, takes place among 200 participants at various L.A. locations during February and March of 1986. The plan is to collect primary materials from taped-recorded community dialogues so that the sound artist/engineer Susan Stone can create a soundtrack for
the culminating performance pageant in May. The participants are first divided into basically homogeneous groups to discuss the Dark Madonna concept and its resonance with racial/ethnic issues. Conflicts emerge as the group subsequently begins to meet cross-racially. One basic problem is the location for meetings. After an African American woman from Watts, for example, travels to Pasadena for a meeting, she is concerned and angry that not one of the Pasadena women shows up at the next meeting, held in Watts. More than the city’s geographic disparity, such conflict exposes L.A.’s racially and economically segregated residential communities. The woman from Watts does eventually decide to stay with the project after a meeting with the event’s organizers in Watts. Her dissenting voice is incorporated into Stone's soundtrack.

Enter the third phase of *The Dark Madonna*, the performance pageant at UCLA's Franklin D. Murphy Sculpture Garden on May 31, 1986. In the dusk, on the grassy slope, approximately fifty women and children, dressed all in white, display themselves as living statues on pedestals raised among permanent sculptural figures by artists like Auguste Rodin and Gaston Le Chaise (fig. 14). These female statues form a temporary museum of multiethnic and multigenerational tableaux vivants by assuming various stances and configurations that reveal their individualities. An Asian woman plays a white instrument; a Chicano, holding an infant swathed in white, sways softly in a rocking chair; an elderly Caucasian woman, with a teenager holding her arm, relaxes in a wheelchair; an African woman stands tall with her turquoise-colored lips pursed. These silent bodies, stilled for the duration of a sunset, are accompanied by prerecorded conversations among women, made into an aural collage, fluttering like overlaid whispers from the amplifiers planted in trees. Just before the last light fades, ten black-clad runners dart, zigzagging, through the sculpture garden. Each runner pauses in front of a pedestal and slowly covers the white statue with a black drape, while other statues remove their own white garments to reveal black ones underneath. They time their actions to coincide with the movement of the natural light. Suddenly everything in the garden becomes dark.

Stone's soundtrack shifts its character as the darkness ascends; whispers among women change from memories of pain, discrimination, and racism to stories about recovery and...
reconciliation. Groups of six or eight women, dressed in black, emerge from all sides of the garden, shining their flashlights on the darkened paths. The black figures from the pedestals gradually join these women, who walk and sway in unison, like one body, until they reach a grassy clearing and sit together in a ring, their faces illuminated by the campfire-like flashlights. The spectators (about two thousand in number) are invited to walk closer, to audit, or even to join in the performers' discussions about their experiences with life crises, the resolutions of those crises, and survival. Lit only intermittently by the vestiges of flashlights, these attentive ears hover around the performers like silhouetted specters of forbearance, curiosity, excitement.

If Lacy's methodology is proactive, flexible, and practical, then abstraction is the order of her symbolism. In the performance pageant of The Dark Madonna, this order of abstraction appears in the three-part choreographed action sequence (from isolation, to contact, to community), in the reified attitudes assumed by the tableau performers, in Stone's soundtrack marked by the dichotomy between strife and peace, and in the black and white color contrast of the costume design. According to Lacy, the two tableaux composed of women dressed in white and black represent for her “day and night, differences and similarities.” She also stresses that her most important task in this piece is to locate the precise moment when daylight changes into darkness in order to signal the performers to alter their costumes from white to black “so that suddenly the garden is all covered by darkness, like lightning,” Lacy says, “but I missed by about two seconds—I made the call too early.”

Lacy's search for precision in The Dark Madonna is in keeping with the level of abstraction she has brought to her artworks. It reflects a visual artist's propensity for creating an acute, frozen pictorial moment. This formalist propensity drives Lacy's desire for a clear-cut dichotomy between white and black, daylight and darkness, calamity and salvation—and, by implication, between the white plague and the dark madonna. For me, however, it is not the precise separation but the ambiguity between these states that makes The Dark Madonna a prescient piece. In a sense, The Dark Madonna actually becomes itself, a significant redressive/art performance, by inadvertently subverting the artist's self-assigned “most important” directorial task.

Because the action of The Dark Madonna happens at dusk, the contrasts just noted are reframed as transitions of experiential states rather than diametrically opposed entities. The performers' heterogeneity becomes less discernible when the realm of visibility in daylight gradually shifts to the realm of aurality and tactility in the dark. Predicated by the performance sequence, a picture of diversity first emerges, when the multiethnic living statues freeze in postures that crystallize their identities, taking up what Bertolt Brecht would call their “gestus”—the “gist and gestures” typical of their personal/gender/ethnic/class modalities. These divergent identity-postures that memorialize the performers' particularities diminish in gradation as the night falls and the statues dismount from isolated pedestals to become a fraction in a chain of anonymous but communicating bodies.

At this juncture, I must admit that Lacy's choice of making the darkness her symbol of totality/unity has at least perceptual validity, because a communal rather than an isolated atmosphere is promoted by the reduction of the performers' visible differences and physical distance in the dark. The participants are joined in an environment conducive to fostering their affinities, for their bodies are literally, emotionally, and physically engaged by the common
task at hand: to carry on dialogue for an ongoing performance. Their individual presences are
equalized by their joint existential condition for the moment: the night air; the voices
dispersing like whispers in flight; the agile, vigilant, but unimposing flashlights; the smell and
warmth of surrounding bodies. As they inhabit the ring, resembling prehistoric actors in a
campfire theater, the performers' similarities as women and humans are foregrounded while
they transact intimate thoughts. Thus, these everyday dark madonnas participate in a clichéd
but affective magic circle of lives, tending to their present exchanges. Meanwhile, the Dark
Madonna, as the nominal origin of this feminist civic theater, seemingly recedes into the night
sky, retiring from sound and sight. She has found her mortal apparitions in these speaking,
thinking, and feeling bodies. Connection is, so the performance signals, where salvation
resides.

The Dark Madonna demonstrates several distinctive features of Lacy's largescale
feminist/redressive performances, including (1) close attention to pressing public issues in a
particular (urban) site; (2) an extended period of planning and execution; (3) a process of
networking, community mobilizing, and institutional negotiations; (4) an effective media
strategy to publicize the project; (5) a multilevel pool of participants and targeted spectators;
(6) balanced manipulation of both form and content, aesthetic vessel and sociocultural
messages; and (7) striking conceptual and visual symbolism. The success of the first five
features depends on Lacy's competence as a social designer, her ability to assemble a massive
production team, and her willingness to allocate a large portion of her work to others. Her
sense of control as a director is likely to decrease in direct proportion to the increase of the
project's scope, duration, and number of participants. All these factors subject Lacy to a
decentering process as far as her artistic subjectivity goes, a process she endorses.

Lacy has stressed that her role resembles that of a facilitator more than that of a singular
author: “The reason I'm doing [The Dark Madonna] is not because I'm Suzanne Lacy, artist,
but because I really care about a collective voice.” While Lacy eagerly acknowledges her
core collaborators—the production director Anne Bray and the community dialogue
coordinators Yolanda Chambers Adelson, Willow Young, and Carol Hegshe—her signature
as an artist is unmistakable in The Dark Madonna. I regard this signature as Lacy's claim to
her artistic centricity in an inevitable and voluntary decentering process required by her
project, for she never relinquishes control over the last two features on my list. Her artistic
centricity is expressed in devising the three-phase performative frame to supply knowledge,
stimulate dialogues, and ferment imagination concerning the multivalent concept/symbol of
the Dark Madonna, which she also selects as the project's center to cohere disparate elements.
The Dark Madonna is then the carrier of Lacy's

name, a principal signifier of her artistic vision, and the pivoting point in her performative
frame. Precisely because the Dark Madonna is multiple, ambivalent, and explicit in its triple
signification as a gender, ethnic, and spiritual concept/symbol, I identify it as the nominal
essence and unifying iconography of Lacy's multicultural feminism.

The Affective Anatomy of Performance Art

Underlying the awesome performance technology exemplified by my checklist is Lacy's
persistent fascination with the self/other dynamics and her ethi/thetics of connection. As a
single self, she extends her artistic subjectivity to encompass and interact with more and more
others. This expansive orientation entails an intersubjective exchange between the artist's self
and her participatory others: Lacy's self becomes reiterated, fragmented, multiplied, and transformed by these others, while these others both take over parts of her self and are temporarily subsumed under her nominal self, the cooperative project that has mobilized them all.

The extended process of preparing and executing a large-scale project binds Lacy with her collaborators and participants. All of them have to devote certain periods of their lives to the gestation and procreation of their communal project. Since Lacy has always chosen to work with participants who are to some extent subjugated, misrepresented, or even victimized, the interactive process of carrying out a serial collaborative action may have potential healing effects. It enables the participants to break out of their habitual isolation and feeling of impotence—to do something and to be seen and known for doing it. The significance of such a project is then measurable in a concrete sense by its scale, which indicates the artwork's capacity to affect the lives of many others by bringing them closer to themselves and to others. Through the open and prolonged process of approaching a common destination, the artist's participatory others are able to claim their own ownership of the path and experience the power of initiative agency. They become, in a functional sense, Lacy's surrogate selves, her other/selves. Or, as Lippard describes it incisively, “for all [the] dispersal, or radiation [involved in a large-scale project], Lacy's individual vision remains central. She takes her chosen diversity and forms a new hybrid: a multiple self. Thus she gets to be one woman and all-women: the maid, the bride, and the hag; the light and the dark madonna.”

In an unpublished manuscript entitled “Women in Transition: Art and Public Policy,” Lacy suggests that she takes on enormous community art projects because she believes that artists should take “a responsive, rather than reflexive, position of leadership in community life.” Her effort to assume such a responsibility (read responsive-ability) is revealed in a major theme that characterizes her performance projects: “the transition from self-definition to group identification to other-directed empathy that forms the backbone of community.” This statement also delineates the trajectory of Lacy's career: from her solitary performative photographs and self-aging performances, in which she both attains “self-definition” as Lacy the artist and substantiates her “group identification” as Lacy the feminist, to her large-scale new genre public art that both depends on and actively cultivates her own and her participants' “other-directed empathy.”

For Lacy, this “other-directed empathy” translates into the desire to understand and connect with the audience, her immediate others in a performance context. Thus, in a later article, “Debated Territory: Toward a Critical Language for Public Art,” she emphasizes reconceptualizing the role of the audience as an analytical tool for new genre public art. Since many new genre public performances are situated in “the space between artist and audience,” Lacy theorizes, the process of interaction is often the only art product and the artwork itself becomes “a metaphor for relationship.” This “relationship” exists not only between the artist and audience but also between the audience and the art-making process: “Of interest is not simply the makeup or identity of the audience but to what degree audience participation forms and informs the work—how it functions as integral to the work's structure.” Stated in my lingo, how does the audience voluntarily become, to varying degrees, the artist's participatory other/selves?
It goes without saying that Lacy's conception of the audience is much broader than the conventional positioning of the audience as consumers of cultural commodities. Disregarding the line between the artist/self and the audience/other, she takes “the audience” to be her signifier for a motley and flexible pool of potential collaborators. In “Debated Territory” she compares the audience to “a series of concentric circles with permeable membranes that allow continual movement back and forth,” radiating out from the central artistic core in a rippling effect. For me, the insight of this model lies in Lacy's designation of “responsibility” as the force that propels the vacillating movement among these circles. “Genesis and responsibility are paired in this model, the center equaling the creative impetus. From this center, the basis of which varies from artwork to artwork, emerge images and structures (though not necessarily the meaning—that is completed by the audience).”

If Lacy uses “genesis” to signify the creative energy that emanates from the artistic subject/self, then we may take her “responsibility” to indicate the self's ability to interact with the projected task and with others involved in the same task. By pairing genesis with responsibility, Lacy simultaneously neutralizes the artist's privilege as the creative genius and compels the artist to maintain, or even to earn, her/his authorship by remaining responsive to vicissitudes.

In this model, I argue, the artist's subjectivity/centricity is both destabilized and ensured. Although Lacy herself may not have anticipated this consequence, I believe her model implies that an audience member for a particular piece may theoretically volunteer to become a coauthor, or even to usurp the authorship, if s/he is willing and capable of assuming more responsibilities. At the same time, Suzanne Lacy, as the authorial center, will still be the single most remembered name for a certain project, however much her participatory other/selves may have contributed to the project: the socially constructed entitlement associated with authorship is not so easily deconstructed—much to the relief of the author/creator, I assume.

Since the targeted performance in her analysis is a large-scale and community-based piece, such as *The Dark Madonna*, Lacy proposes a complex, fluid, and multilevel model for reconceptualizing the audience. Her model begins with the center around which the gravity of responsibility pivots, radiating out to six concentric circles: (1) “The center of the circle are those without whom the work could not exist.” This circle may include the artist alone as the author/performer of one or an ensemble of artists who initiate the project. (2) “The next circle out from the center includes the collaborators or codevelopers, shareholders who have invested time, energy, and identity in the work and who partake deeply in its ownership.” This group represents the true believers, who become engaged with the work after its point of origin. (3) “The next level of participation would be the volunteers and performers, those about, for, and with whom the work is created.” This constituency is often located in the community to which the performance is addressed. (4) “Another ring of the circle consists of those who have a direct experience of the artwork”—the group we usually recognize as the live audience. (5) The next ring consists of what Lacy calls the “media audience”—“the audience that experiences the work through reports, documentation, or representation. This audience includes people who read about the artwork in newspapers, watch it on television, or attend subsequent documentary exhibition.” (6) Beyond this ring exists “the audience of myth and memory,” an audience of posterity that carries the artwork over time as a cultural heritage or, in Lacy's words, “a commonly held possibility.”
In elucidating her multiple audienceships, Lacy manages to chart what I like to call the affective anatomy of performance art, revealing her understanding of performance as a transmuted genre of conceptual art. Here I propose simplifying Lacy's model to elucidate the essential tripartite anatomy of a single-authored performance, which comprises the creative center, the immediate witnesses, and the tertiary others—without attaching hierarchical value to privilege “original” center or “authentic” account over “tertiary” imagination. In this performance anatomy, the concentric circles represent different constituencies for performance, from the center of originary artist/self/performer, to the middle ring of viewers/immediate others who witness the performance, to the outer ring of those interested, posterior others who may be characterized as the virtual audience—one that is physically and temporally removed from the original site. These people are linked together in a radius of cultural kinship because of the affectability of the particular performance piece, whether they experience it live (as an actual performance) or conceptually (as a virtual performance).

Just as Lacy has stressed that her model is nonhierarchical in intention, so my simplified version does not evaluate the merit of audience responses based on the respondent's actual or virtual experience with the originary performance. A person who reads about a performance, for example, may feel more affected by this virtual encounter than a person who sees it live. Since an artwork's impact on society tends to be subliminal, syncopated, and deferred, I contend that it depends to a great degree on the existence of a tertiary, virtual audience. It takes time and people for a performance to become a memory, a rumor, a myth, a commonly held possibility, an inspiring cultural deposit. For only through documentation can a performance reach a virtual audience. Hence, Lacy's question: “Is an actualized work more effective than a proposal?”[83]

Ultimately, I contend, it is the person who becomes compelled to respond to a performance, even a proposed performance—by thinking and writing about it, by creating another performance, or by starting a community outreach project—who claims cultural ownership of the originary performance. My argument questions the conventional weight given to the “authorial intention,” “actual experience,” “immediate impact,” “unmediated encounter,” and “verifiable proceeding” of a performance project, but radically validates a tertiary audience/respondent's subsequent conceptual appropriation of the performance as an affective model and a cultural legacy.

The conceptual economy circulating in performance's affective anatomy that I have just sketched yields a different interpretation of Lacy's large-scale feminist/redressive performances. While these works attack pressing social issues and seek to empower disenfranchised participants by joining them in a temporary community for a common artistic cause, they still exist at best as heuristic models that bridge aesthetic and social occupations. These performances, as we've seen, exercise an ethos of connection, exert immediate influences on the artist's and participants' lives for a certain period, urge positive social change, and instigate appropriate legislative modification in policy-making. It would be harder to claim, however, that these performances are therefore able to replace the day-to-day social, political, and economic functions carried out by government agencies and community institutions.
The Dark Madonna, for example, may have exposed multicultural and interracial tensions among women in L.A. before the problem became coopted by media saturation into just another topical issue. Under the auspices of diverse community organizations, the project may have brought a large sampling of these women together to interact with one another. The year-long process behind the project and the presentation of the final performance pageant may have emphatically demonstrated that such cross-cultural and multiethnic communication is necessary and possible. Nevertheless, the project can neither be held responsible for the persistent racism that plagues L.A. nor be exempt from critical evaluation of its multifaceted expressions as a public artwork, an extended performance, and a cultural product. As Lacy comments, “It is possible that process-oriented public art is at its most powerful when, as with most visual art forms, it operates as a symbol.”

The Dark Madonna, in this final analysis, survives as an affective and provocative symbol for Lacy's contribution to L.A.'s performance culture.

During her nearly two-decade tenure in L.A., Lacy engaged in agynocentric investigation of corporeal existence, embodied other-directed empathy, and attacked violence against women. She interrogated inherited barriers to interracial understanding among women, idealistically affirmed the strength, diversity, and beauty of ordinary women, and exhibited their record of survival. Lacy has remapped the artist's self as committed, malleable, effervescent, and vast. Her art denies the antinomy between self and other as predetermined, for she is able to turn the material and psychic borders that guard her artistic subjectivity into the limina that binds her with others. Her largescale feminist/multicultural performances envision the union of multiple others as an expansive communal self. Lacy's legacy in L.A. is one that demonstrates the possibility of performance as a birthing event that connects the self to the world. Her feminist art has engendered other/selves, even just for the duration of a sunset.
4. Elia Arce

A Skin Test and a Tongue Transplant

[Segment 2]

A Woman in a Cage

A naked female figure sits with bent legs in an enlarged, ornamented bird cage (fig. 15). Motionless, her elbows touch the edge of the cage, her head resting on one of her bent arms; her face and most of her upper torso are hidden by her dark cascading hair. A label attached to the cage reads, “feed me.” A man tentatively approaches the cage, puts a beer bottle on the ground, and quickly walks away. More offerings follow: candy bars, flowers, chewing gum, fruit, an avocado. Someone opens the cage door and puts a glass of water inside. Some people linger around the cage and try to start a conversation with the captive/woman. There is no response from her: she is a mute and faceless flesh sculpture, oblivious to the sign that invites spectators to engage in a feeding exchange with her.

The Artist

This tableau vivant installation was the pre-performance (non)action sequence for Elia Arce's 1993 solo piece *I Have So Many Stitches That Sometimes I Dream That I'm Sick*, which took place at Highways Performance Space. The piece was presented in a series called “Fierce Tongues/Women of Fire,” curated by

Monica Palacios and Luis Alfaro, as part of the 1993 Los Angeles Festival. Although the installation appeared as a preface to this particular work, I find it a pertinent index to Arce's numerous solo performances.

Arce, a theater director, filmmaker, and performance artist, moved to the genre of solo performance after years of working as an ensemble member in performance collectives such as the Bread and Puppet Theater and the Los Angeles Poverty Department (LAPD). While her ensemble works with both groups followed a gender-neutral socialist and collective agenda, her solo performances demonstrate an explicit interest in self-determination and feminist inquiry. According to Arce, since she started to perform solo in 1989, her art has focused on issues of “identity, immigration and the psychology of power based on [her] own personal experiences as a Central American immigrant to this country.” Arce's validation of her gendered identity and personal experience recalls the feminist strategy to investigate the social from within the individual. Her particular approach to feminism further blends gender-sensitive issues with the pain of immigration, which, for a person of her national, social, and ethnic background, often denotes the transgender concerns of racism, economic deprivation, and cultural dislocation. As an immigrant from Costa Rica, Arce wears palpable signs of her so-called Third World status on her nonwhite skin and in her foreign accent; her migration charts a path of geographical transplantation aggravated by emotional crises, linguistic shifts,
and cultural maladjustment. Exploring her identity in performance therefore involves confronting complex structures of domination in relation to her own particular gender, race, ethnicity, class, and culture, for she cannot escape or categorize into separate entities the cumulative impact of these colluding forces on her existence.

Arce's feminist politics sharply confronts the interlocking systems of oppression that have simultaneously shaped, constrained, and dismissed her racialized and sexualized identity. In this respect, her feminism echoes positions held by many U.S. feminists of color. At the same time, Arce's artistic development demonstrates some irreducible differences from other feminists of color, indicating the impossibility of theoretically accounting for all subject positions. Here, for the sake of argument, let me risk a generalization: Most U.S. feminists of color caution against the problem of “individualism,” which is seen as coterminous with the modal feminist as “an autonomous, self-making, self determining subject.” Arce's own approach to feminism, in contrast, rests crucially on an emergent individualist consciousness, which empowers her to claim exactly what Norma Alarcón criticizes as the “ethnocentric liberal underpinnings” characteristic of some (male-identified) Anglo American feminists: “to pursue her own identity, to name herself, to pursue self-knowledge.” Is it possible, I ask, that these pursuits of self-identity, self-naming, and self-knowledge are not so much ethnocentric as humanist? Is it also possible that these individualist pursuits are not necessarily phallocentric or uniformly condemnable but rather have emancipatory potentials?

For a “First World” feminist theorist like Alarcón, an antihumanist critique may be the best strategy for disturbing the individualistic cultural status quo and undermining the sedimentary effects of European and North American colonialism, which may locate its seed in the supremacy and autonomy of the rational humanist subject. For an (ex-) “Third World” feminist artist like Arce, whose subjectivity is assumed a priori by the colonial power to be inchoate, fragmented, and misshapen, the most radical remedial procedure may well reside not in deconstructing humanist individualism but precisely in claiming such humanist concepts as autonomy, independence, consciousness, freedom, agency, centeredness, and self-determination to be her own prerogatives. Particularized by multiple interwoven and contradictory forces, Arce's approach not only stands as a Central American exception to the North American norm but ultimately exceeds the general theoretical presumptions associated with the category “feminists of color” or even “women of color” in the United States. Her career attests to the continuous exigency of conceptual flexibility recommended by the cultural critic bell hooks, who urges all feminists to “resist hegemonic dominance of feminist thought by insisting that it is a theory in the making, that we must necessarily criticize, question, re-examine, and explore new possibilities.”

I am interested in exploring one of these new possibilities demonstrated by Arce's feminist excess, which deeply informs her self-authored performance projects. These projects include both ensemble performances conceived and directed by Arce and solo performances written, staged, and enacted by her. The ensemble projects continue Arce's work as a theater artist; the solo performances, since they deal with her identity politics and self-presentation as an immigrant artist, may be more exactly called self performances. Insofar as these projects confront Arce's perceptions of her own cultural invisibility and social subjugation, they fall in the genre of redressive performance. By the author's intent, however, these projects are emphatically art performances, because they explore not just her sociopolitical status as an other subject but embody her vision and stake as an independent artist.
Arce's redressive/art performances exemplify different permutations of the feminist-multicultural continuum explored in previous chapters. Read against the multiethnic, multicultural, and multinational milieu of L.A., Arce's feminist performances are especially luminous in an era when the city's demographic composition in every census estimate is transformed by waves of im-migration. As immigrants, political and economic refugees, and migrant workers from Central and South American countries move into this metropolis at an astounding rate, the surface of L.A. is going through “Latinization.”[8] The presence of Arce's work supplies material evidence for this irreversible trend; it also proffers a rare artistic expression for an underrepresented and largely mute major minority in L.A.

Arce's performances elucidate the relevance of racial/ethnic difference and the complexity of socioeconomic and psychocultural determinants in shaping an individual's lived experiences in a multiethnic nation, such as the United States, that operates on “asymmetric race and class relations.”[9] In this light, I suggest, Arce's work provides a strong version of multicultural performance art, considering especially that multiculturalism emerged as a redressive politics and pedagogy to champion diversity, tolerance, and inclusiveness. Gauged by the ethos of multiculturalism (with its mantra-like rubrics of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, age, and other differences), Arce is an ideal multicultural subject. Her biographical profile fits the multicultural agenda to such an extent that encouraging her art/work amounts to encouraging multiculturalism. In fact, Arce started presenting her solo projects at the peak of the multicultural trend in L.A. To phrase it facetiously, we might say that Arce and L.A.-styled multiculturalism happened to function as each other's beneficiary—at least for a five-year period (1989–94).

Although Arce has ridden the multicultural tide, she is reluctant to link her art with multiculturalism. Her resistance to this label comes from her suspicion that the term “multiculturalism” is a fabrication by the dominant cultural forces to regulate their others. In her own words: “I hate to say it, I was very cynical right from the start about the whole multiculturalism trend— because it sounded very fake to me. It sounded like an imposed law, and nothing works that way.”[10] “Why should the ruling class give up their power?” she adds as an afterthought. Arce's suspicion is justifiable to the extent that her sole access to multiculturalism was through the L.A. media and art-funding agencies. According to Christopher Newfield and Avery F. Gordon, multiculturalism originated in the 1970s as “a grassroots attempt at community-based racial reconstruction through that vital local institution, the neighborhood public school”; it exercised a “multidimensional approach” to “reorganize education for the benefit of minority students” and to promote an antiracist social and cultural life.[11] Taken in this educational context, multiculturalism does not contradict Arce's own socialist propensity and her class-sex-race-sensitive aesthetics. Arce, however, did not encounter this dimension of multiculturalism.

As an aspiring immigrant artist who moved to L.A. in the mid-1980s, Arce might have experienced multiculturalism the way that I myself—as another immigrant artist—experienced it in the early 1990s: a fashionable (hence ephemeral) slogan that suddenly hit the newsstand; a selling point that affected theater's, cinema's, and network TV's casting and programming policies; a polished subterfuge that displaced the persistent prejudices against human differences; a momentary keyword that had to be incorporated in our grant proposals and applications for employment. Since
multiculturalism is commonly deployed in contemporary media to connote people of color, it misleadingly perpetuates the binarism between a European American (white) majority and its multicultural others without acknowledging that rarely, if ever, is any individual born and bred in this media-saturated country strictly monocultural. The term therefore has an oxymoronic ring to it, being an equivocal identity label that oscillates between euphemism and insult, between misnomer and studied code. I maintain a degree of ambivalence toward multiculturalism because I inhabit both the art world and an academic institution where multiculturalism, in its many guises, still enjoys a certain intellectual and cultural valence. Arce, on the other hand, is much more antagonistic toward multiculturalism because, from her location in the fickle art world, she already anticipates the end of this trend just as it is promoted as the latest buzzword. Besides, when she receives funding for her multicultural art, she cannot tell whether the award recognizes the merit of her art or simply rewards her own unearned status as a “multicultural” artist. Bearing this label's dubious sanction means that she has to self-consciously negotiate the precarious line between sponsorship and patronization, moral/financial support and institutional control, representation and co-optation, affirmative action and quota diplomacy.

Apart from the complex nexus of ideological and pragmatic factors that affect Arce's attitude toward multiculturalism, her reservations reveal how she perceives her own location in the spectrum of indigenous, imported, and immigrant cultures in L.A. As a new settler who was equally alienated from the mainstream and marginal cultures within the United States, Arce encountered the advent of multiculturalism as a violation rather than a valorization of her own identity. Not only did she not have the choice not to recognize her own cultural differences, but her unstable cultural location was further complicated by the United States' near-omnipresent colonial investments in Latin America. Multiculturalism could hardly disguise the xenophobic violence or compensate for the traumas of racism that she repeatedly experienced from both ethnic majority and minority North Americans. Arce admits that she had encountered and resented the rigid class hierarchy in Costa Rica, but racism was not a conscious issue for her until she emigrated to the United States. Nor was she considered “multicultural” until she arrived in L.A. Although Arce no longer sees herself as Costa Rican, she is not yet ready to join the domesticated multiculturalism in L.A. Stranded between languages, identities, geographies, and cosmologies, Arce's multicultural circumstance is more exactly an intercultural struggle. There is no reason for her to celebrate multiculturalism for its own sake. Instead, her transitions between two widely divergent national cultures have continued to present unavoidable challenges that she must overcome. She has been arrested in a compulsory process of transculturation.

The Immigrant

According to Diana Taylor, “Transculturation suggests a shifting or circulating pattern of cultural transference,” informed by “political positioning and selection.” Such a volatile pattern of cultural transference occurs during the prolonged process when two different cultures come into contact, absorb each other's influences, and produce a third hybridized culture. The term “transculturation” differs from “interculturalism”—which I discussed in chapter 2—in emphasizing the imbalance of power between the two cultures locked in an exchange and the resulting cultural loss, survival, and transformation. As Taylor comments, although “both the dominant and the dominated are modified through their contact with another culture, it is clear that the interaction is neither equal in power or degree nor, strictly
speaking, reciprocal …. There is no dialogue insofar as the word connotes equality and give-and-take, in intercultural perspectives or expressions."[12] Taylor also notes that, in such intercultural contact between two nations of unequal political and economic power, routinely the dominated, or Third World, culture knows significantly more about the First World culture than the other way around.

The accents on inequality, loss, shifting, and alteration associated with transculturation derive from its first theorist, the Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz, who coined the term in 1941 to describe

the different phases in the transitive process from one culture to another, because this process does not only imply the acquisition of culture, as connoted by the Anglo-American term acculturation, but it also necessarily involves the loss or uprooting of one's preceding culture, what one could call a partial disculturation. Moreover, it signifies the subsequent creation of new cultural phenomena that one could call neoculturation.[13]

Taylor indicates that Ortiz's paradigm goes beyond the syncretic model of an uneasy fusion between two cultures, because it “simultaneously notes the co-existence of elements,” “underlines the element of loss of the two systems in the creation of a third,” and accounts for the “historic specificity and artistic originality of the new cultural phenomena.”[14] In short, Ortiz's theory shifts the emphasis from opposition to analysis and concession. As he conceives it, transculturation does not oppose the colonial infiltration of foreign culture into the indigenous as necessarily destructive; instead, it offers a way to elucidate the nebulous process in which two cultures merge and become acclimatized to each other, whereby they assimilate, substitute, and alter each other to (re)produce a hybridized third culture. This concept of transculturation does not so much mourn the vanishing of indigenous culture as signify the vitality of the subsequent cultural progeny born of the match between the indigenous and the foreign.

Although Taylor maintains that transculturation affects the entire national culture from sociopolitical to symbolic systems, I suggest that Ortiz's paradigm of transculturation may also be used on an individual scale to explicate the complicated process of cross-national acculturation experienced by an immigrant within the new host environment. To apply Ortiz's concept in this way lends me an effective tool to analyze Arce's art, which evinces simultaneously a concession to assimilating dominant cultural values, an acknowledgment of the loss of former home culture (“disculturation”), and an expression of her newly customized individual culture (“neoculturation”) in her self-authored performances. The mandatory process of transculturation that Arce must undergo does not turn her into a passive accomplice to her own subjection. On the contrary, she actively engages in her own transculturation as a strategy to survive and prosper—if also with a certain degree of resentment because she cannot choose not to adapt.

In our interview, Arce reiterated the importance of adaptability as the foremost survival skill for an immigrant. Arce emigrated from Costa Rica in 1982 to escape her country's political instability. Speaking no English, yet lured by the myth about the United States as a “gold mine,” Arce moved to Cheyenne, Wyoming, where her brother was stationed at the local air force base. Her plan was to earn enough tuition money to continue her undergraduate theater education in Spain, thinking that she might have a better chance to succeed there for she speaks Spanish well. Her plan, however, was quickly frustrated by the trials of economic
survival. She soon found herself a hotel maid in an international community of women in service positions who were mostly air force wives. Because of her artistic ambition, she migrated to New York City and eventually to L.A., where she earned a B.A. degree in motion picture and television from UCLA.

During these years, the reality of poverty and the necessity of making art jointly defined Arce's existence. Arce has always insisted on her identity as an artist and wanted to pursue art-making—in whatever form—as a career. Her example presents an antithesis to Allan Kaprow's call for art practitioners to un-art themselves. As a person who is less socially assured than Kaprow in claiming the title of "artist," Arce clings to her artistic identity. In the same light, Kaprow's proposal for the blurring of art and life doesn't work for Arce.

While Kaprow, with his reputation as an artist and his tenured position as an art professor, could afford to consider the division between art and life as artificial and surmountable by consciousness and will, Arce has to confront the split between her life as an impoverished immigrant trying to survive and her art as a lifelong passion that must be pursued at all costs. There is then a substantial schism between her art and life that frequently threatens to erupt. She cannot will away this schism merely by treating her life struggles as conceptual art.

The desire to learn how to become an artist despite all contrary forces led Arce to work with Peter Schumann's Bread and Puppet Theater, for which she served as a cultural liaison to Central America. Arce worked with the Nicaraguan grassroots art organization Mecate, bringing artists from Nicaragua and Costa Rica to Vermont for collaborative projects with Schumann's company. From the Bread and Puppet Theater, Arce learned to make giant puppets, to organize spectacular public processions and carnivals, and to mobilize artists and nonartist around sociopolitical issues. Most important, she found an answer to her own question of how to make imaginative art by using minimal resources. This fascination with art-of-necessity-despite-poverty later attracted Arce to the Los Angeles Poverty Department, a performance ensemble directed by John Malpede. Arce joined LAPD right after she had seen their first indoor performance, South of the Clouds (1986), at the Boyd Street Theatre. For the next five years, LAPD became her artistic home base. She played supporting roles for other company members who used the performance medium to reconnect with their own lost pasts; she toured with the troupe to other cities; and she eventually became a codirector with Malpede, working on Jupiter 35 (1989–90), an ensemble piece first presented in the 1990 Los Angeles Festival.

Arce's path in LAPD exemplifies Suzanne Lacy's conception of responsibility as the primary determinant for an individual's role in a collaborative situation. That Arce chose to affiliate herself with the homeless members of LAPD (which included participants from diverse races, sexes, and ages) rather than with local Chicano/as implies a class-centered identification over that of race, gender, language, or religion. This tendency to privilege class over other identificational determinants hints at how Arce conceptualized and constructed her own sociocultural position, selecting what was, for her at that particular moment, the most congenial community.

Arce's affinity for the Bread and Puppet Theater and for LAPD reveals her aspiration as an artist. Both groups are founded on charismatic individuals' visions and passions for the extra-aesthetic potentials of performance. The Bread and Puppet Theater grew out of Schumann's belief in the spirituality of theater art, which, to him, is as necessary as bread: food for the body and
sacrament for this body's salvation. LAPD has been nurtured by Malpede's efforts to infuse his art with a social purpose and to make performances that are not only useful but instrumental to the survival of neglected contemporary populations: the homeless and the poor. As organizations that provide a sense of belonging and stability for their participants, both collectives emphasize ensemble efforts and group agency in the creation and production of art events. It is understandable why these two collectives would have appealed to Arce, given her socialist ideology and proactive politics as an artist from a Central American country torn by enormous political and economic problems. Both groups taught her to work with limitations—"to make positives out of negatives, which was really a survival skill," in Arce's words.\[17\]

The earliest performance Arce staged in L.A. demonstrated her ability to synthesize the training she had gained as an artist in the United States, while addressing her political concerns as a Latina. Arce conceived, directed, and performed in *Blessed by the Contradictions* (1986), a political carnival with core participants from her new circle of artist friends, including the Mexican Salvadoran American poet Rubén Martinez, the Salvadoran choreographer Daniela Heredia, the Salvadoran poet and sculptor Dagoberto Reyes, the African American poet Michéle T. Clinton, and two LAPD members, the Italian Jewish American John Malpede and the African American Kevin Williams. Arce drew many techniques from the Bread and Puppet Theater to stage this massive political spectacle commemorating the late Salvadoran poet Roque Dalton's birthday. A well-known Marxist poet and revolutionary soldier, Dalton (1935–75) was tortured by CIA agents in El Salvador for his communist involvement, sentenced to death by his government, and miraculously escaped to join the publishing agency Casa de las Américas in Havana in the post-Revolution Cuba, only to be martyred a few years later by his dissenting communist comrades when he secretly returned to El Salvador for guerrilla actions.\[18\] Because of his political status, Dalton's poetry was banned in El Salvador during most of his lifetime. As a protest against such political censorship, *Blessed by the Contradictions* pivots around the action of sharing Dalton's literary gifts with participants and spectators. Arce stands on stilts, wears a huge mask that resembles Dalton's face, and pulls out a long scroll from the mask's mouth (fig. 16). Inscribed on the scroll is poem after poem written by Dalton. The poems are then torn individually from the scroll and distributed among all present.

Incidentally, my attempt to comment on this performance brings out a difficult problem in performance research. My account is based on Arce's oral history and a few remaining yellowed photographs from the event. Most of the actions were improvised by participants. There is no script, score, or videotape available to me (or, for that matter, to Arce herself). All this points to
the ephemeral quality of all performances and how any interpretive venture incurs much loss and depends on the contribution of once-or-twice-removed imagination. This is true even when considerable documentation is present. An interpreter, like myself, must inevitably exercise re/creative license, filling in the gaps among thin air, faded memory, postmortem rationalization, dramatic thematization, and unconscious or premeditated embellishment. This digression serves as an alibi for the following account.

In addition to celebrating Dalton's poetry, Arce used *Blessed by the Contradictions* to examine the racism within the Mexican American immigrant communities toward the Central and South American Latino/as who were later settlers in L.A. Her collaboration with Rubén Martínez, whose personal heritage embodies such tensions and contradictions between Mexico and the rest of Latin America, brought her closer to naming what she was previously unable to register in her mind as nonwhite racism. The topos of intra-racism— the xenophobic intolerance that rages within and among nonwhite native and immigrant communities—challenges the saccharine rhetoric on multiculturalism as a pluralist foundation for coalition among people of color. Arce's sensitivity to this topos may indicate another aspect of her transculturation.

Through her ensemble works with LAPD, Arce became increasingly committed to creating individual projects. As she witnessed the homeless artists' endeavors to express their broken lives in performance, Arce realized that her own specific circumstances as a person from Central America needed to be heard. “It is not so much about me telling someone, ‘This is what happened,’ but I need to hear my experience spoken to me,” she explains. “I need to hear that my reality [is] real and that it matters.” Arce's reality circulates around an
experiential morass of quadruple otherness; she is sexually, racially, culturally, and economically an other—other than the male, Anglo American, Protestant, upper-middle-class subjects. Placed within the North American cultural framework, Arce has to first own her otherness before she can claim a self-identity. Initially, however, Arce was repelled by solo performance—or more exactly, by autobiographical self performance. Her ingrained socialist consciousness prepared her to reject the sight of an individual divulging her/ his life stories in public as the ultimate spectacle of decadent individualism. She recalled walking out of the first self performance she saw in New York, feeling disgusted by the artist's solipsistic indulgence. The performer was, as she later discovered, John Malpede! Ironically, as Arce became more acclimatized to North American culture, she adopted self performance as the most efficacious medium with which to unravel the manifold entanglements between her selfhood and otherness. Individualism became for her no longer a sin of egoistic others but an aspiration for her self. This change of Arce's selfperception and cultural positioning, reflected in her enactment of identity politics in self performance, again signals her transculturation.

Manifested in her solo pieces, Arce's strategies for transculturation include mastery of the English language, the privileging of individualistic selfsufficiency, a confrontation with her genealogical heritage, and the cultivation of an aesthetics that conflates a Catholic cosmology with afeminist worldview. If Arce's life attitude is one of flexibility and tenacity, her art sensibility evokes the fervor of expressionism. In her related self performances, I Have So Many Stitches That Sometimes I Dream That I'm Sick (1993) and Stretching My Skin Until It Rips Whole (1994), for example, Arce chooses to speak English through most of the show, but she manipulates different pitches, tonality, and emotional timbres in her vocal delivery. Significantly, in each performance, there is an isolated segment where Arce intones Spanish hymns while carrying out a simulated Catholic sacrament. During these ritualistic actions, she seems to have been transported into an ahistorical zone of prenatal memories, which have marked her body with a residual spirituality bequeathed by her native Costa Rican culture. Another interesting detail that imparts Arce's difference from a Chicana: the divine female icon that she evokes in performances is the Catholic Virgin Mary (Santa Maria) rather than the Mexican Virgen de Guadalupe or La Malinche.

The Feminist

What fascinates me the most in Arce's development as a transculturated immigrant artist is her increasing engagement with gender and sexuality as a means of naming and enacting her own embodied subjectivity. Further, in her quest to understand and construct her female subjectivity, she takes the path toward self-determination, autonomy, and affirmation. Her coming into feminist consciousness coincides with an emergent individualism: the former turns her into a critic against patriarchal domination and sexist oppression of (all) women; the latter catapults her from her ancestral genealogies, freeing her from having to show solidarity with her “people” (Costa Ricans and other Latin Americans) at all times.

For Arce, to reach this conceptual equation between her feminism and her individualism has not been an easy task. She did not accomplish this simply by crossing the border between her Third World past and First World future—as if through an airborne epiphany or a visa exchange; rather, she had to earn her double feminist and individualist consciousness through extended labor and persistent will. In addition to selectively assimilating dominant social values, Arce has had to struggle with her own internalized colonization and interrogate her
normative state of being as a mestiza from a sexist, economically and politically subjugated Central American country. She has had to question a Costa Rican cultural upbringing that values familial heritage, religious indoctrination, and collective class politics. What I may term as Arce's *feminist individualism* represents both a reversal of her inherited acculturation and a temporary conclusion to a long process of transculturation, which continues to this date. I reiterate the inflections of loss, flexibility, and survival in Ortiz's theory to stress that Arce's own transculturation is not necessarily a linear progress toward an ever brighter prospect—for individualism is not superior to familial lineage or socialist collectivism, nor is feminism a goal for every female-gendered subject. Transculturation is nevertheless an ineluctable process for Arce in the hope of becoming a working artist in this country. Her performances are partial fruits of her transculturated endeavor.

As I've indicated, it took Arce more than half a decade to be able to present her first solo pieces, in 1989. Although she stayed with LAPD until 1991 and enjoyed a fulfilling working relationship with the troupe, Arce realized that she had to strike out on her own to pursue what concerned her most in artmaking.

Her series of incandescent solo pieces place an increasing weight on her female identity, producing an implicit shift in her self-representation. She begins as a Latina immigrant who frames her politics according to her assumed sociocultural position and evolves into a feminist subject who questions her own acculturation as a gendered individual and who agitates against the patriarchal status quo. At the center of Arce's feminist inquiry is her politicized individualism, which acquires varying degrees of acuteness in her solo works. This conceptual and ideological center provides a lens through which we may analyze Arce's solo pieces and elucidate one culminating effect of her transculturation. Most likely, Arce's *feminist individualism* represents merely a particular phase, as tentative and changeable as any other, in her continual transculturation. What I present in this chapter is then a sequence of snapshots about an artist in the making, an immigrant becoming a citizen, and a feminist subject in progress.

The Latina

*In Search of Fresh Fish* (1989), Arce's first full-evening solo performance, lasting from 8 p.m. to midnight, shows the artist negotiating her identity as a Latina immigrant without problematizing her role as a woman. Feminist individualism is not yet an issue here; instead, the piece's motivating force comes from Arce's position as a Central American political artist.

*In Search of Fresh Fish* revolves around the process of making food, an activity conventionally performed by women. The performance starts with a recorded long-distance phone conversation between Arce and a Costa Rican woman who knows the recipe for *Rondón*, a typical fish stew in Nicaragua and the Caribbean islands. The recording conveys the different ingredients and procedures for cooking *Rondón*; its medium is the aural texture woven by Arce's Costa Rican Spanish and the woman's patois. Arce enters the performance space at Highways with alive fish in a bucket. Based on her research in Chinatown's fish market, the artist tells how one can hit a fish's head with a heavy block to make it unconscious (so it can die without pain) and how one can quickly slice it open, disembowel it, and prepare it for cooking. She solicits the audience members for a volunteer to kill the fish, so that she can cook it for them. She has already set up a kitchen unit in the adjacent gallery. After some anxious silence, a near riot breaks out. People shout “murder” from the auditorium. “How can you do such a thing?” they accuse, storming out of Highways. Others counteraccuse the
accusers. Amid general confusion, Arce manages to have the fish killed, prepared, and stewed. The performance ends with the sharing of the fish stew among Arce and her remaining guests.

Without considering how Arce's ethnic and national identity may have affected her performance, I might interpret *In Search of Fresh Fish* as a philosophical contemplation on the sanctity of life, the inevitability of killing to sustain life, and the permissible boundaries of art-making. The piece raises the perplexing question of whether making art can justify the killing of a live fish. Arce complicates the question by framing her performance as a cooking event. While she did kill the fish for her art, the fish was also made into food and eventually consumed as a meal. The fish did not die as cruelly and as gratuitously as, for example, the four rats burned alive in Kim Jones's infamous performance *rat piece* (1976), which both contests and mirrors the violence of the Vietnam War, the sadism of shooting for sport, and the random brutality that we find in everyday life. When the rats screeched in pain in their burning cage, Jones did nothing but scream back at his victims. While Jones makes a point—however outrageously—by executing the rats as stand-ins for all victims and by sadistically displaying their suffering process, Arce's piece deals less with violence than with sacrifice. *In Search of Fresh Fish* shifts the focus from the horror of irredeemable destruction to the necessity of destroying life to prolong life. The two performances also differ in the manner and the degree of suffering that each set of animal victims had to endure. Perhaps these differences contributed to the different outcomes: Jones was arrested and charged with cruelty to animals; Arce endured emotional and physical commotion but succeeded in convincing some spectators to participate in her ritual meal.

My nonhistoricized philosophical interpretation of *In Search of Fresh Fish*, however, cannot communicate the political nuances that the artist infuses into the piece. Arce conceived of the piece as a critique of the U.S. policy toward El Salvador, a Central American country torn by civil wars because of U.S. intervention. Arce reinforces her biographical connection with Central America through the opening recording in Spanish and patois, by offering to cook a typical Caribbean-Central American dish, and through her direct address and commentaries. In the light of her political intentions and cultural connection, the killing of the fish alludes to the death of more than 50,000 Salvadorans during the war by 1989. For every question raised from the audience about her violation of animal rights, Arce could theoretically counter with one about human rights and the waste of human lives in Central America. If spectators are appalled by witnessing a fish being killed in front of them, how should they deal with human beings dying in Central America? In this context, Arce's use of the fish becomes quite similar to Jones's use of the rats; their animal victims metonymically evoke, even substitute for, the human victims killed in two ideological wars directly related to the U.S. fight against communism. The spectators' heated reactions in both performances register the excessiveness of violence. As agitprops against violence and militarism, both pieces accomplish their political purposes to a certain extent.

The two performances, however, differ in their referential structures, emotive resonance, and degree of conceptual consistency. While there is a simple, or arguably simplistic, correspondence between Jones's performance action and political intention, Arce's piece operates on at least two conceptual levels: persecution and conversion, destruction and regeneration, waste and nutrition. Jones's piece refuses the closure of any resolution; the
performance dangles in the midst of public shock and indignation. The artist is reprimanded
by subsequent litigation perhaps precisely for his failure to conclude his mimetic action with a
persuasive rationale. Arce, conversely, carries on the motif of preparing a meal and resolves
her “killing” with a cooking and eating ritual that resituates her performance in an intimate,
domestic ambiance. Arce's role in the performance shifts from an angry Latina with an apolitical
message to a forbearing Latina making a wholesome meal. To me, Arce's cooking
performance is conceptually provocative in and of itself, for it brings up unsettling questions
regarding the nature of art, sacrifice, violence, communion, animal and human rights, prey-
and-predator relations. In terms of her proclaimed political purpose, though, I find Arce's
ritual of food-making an obfuscating performance strategy. If the fish functions as a surrogate
for the Salvadoran dead, to convert the slaughtered fish into food then botches the fish's
thematic signification and minimizes the bite of Arce's accusation. Her culinary procedure
dilutes the impact of the fish's death by turning the killing into a life-sustaining sacrifice,
therefore less gratuitous and partially justified. Moreover, the final act of sharing the fish
between herself, the Latina cook/feeder/hostess, and her L.A. guests verges on an unwitting
celebration of cannibalism.

The Latina Feminist

Following my reasoning, In Search of Fresh Fish presents Arce as a Latina artist rather than a
feminist subject. Her gender identity is assumed, not investigated; the piece deals explicitly
with international politics, not sexual politics. The theme of sexual politics emerges in Lip
Sync (1989), a wordless solo performed at Highways as part of Four Bodies, which
interwove brief segments of four artists' works into a full-evening program. Arce planned
the piece to be a series of what she called “five-minute photographs,” exploring her cinematic
interest in still and concentrated images. Lip Sync includes five sequences of extended live
photographs, each lasting five minutes and interspersed with performance sections by the
other three artists. Based on Arce's recollection of the performance score, I hold that Lip Sync
not only tackles her sexual politics but introduces her as a feminist body artist.

The five sequences of Arce's body acts in Lip Sync incrementally map out
the corporeal cartography of an artist who virtually seizes, devours, and digests “the world”—her lived reality represented in performance—with her own sensory organs. The first image is a single eye peeping in semidarkness, accompanied by the soundtrack of heartbeats: Arce hides behind a curtain, revealing only one of her eyes. The second image incorporates her eyes and mouth: Arce sits beside a telephone; she smokes in slow motion, staring at the phone, which never rings. The third image utilizes all her facial muscles: she sits and looks straight ahead at the audience as if there were a mirror between them. Observing her reflection in the imaginary mirror, her face gradually contorts into fluctuating emotions: self-scrutiny, judgment, negotiation, pity, sadness, doubt, resentment, vulnerability, reconciliation. The fourth image turns her hands against her face: her right hand applies lipstick on the mouth, smearing the lips' contour (fig. 17). She smiles, flirts with the air, and suddenly gets slapped by her left hand. She wipes off her lipstick. The sequence recycles itself. The fifth image links her hands, mouth, and teeth in a pleasant act: Arce comes out with a mango, slowly peels the sensuous fruit—a food she used to eat frequently in Costa Rica—and bites into its juicy flesh.

*Lip Sync* offers a glimpse into Arce's burgeoning feminism, although it does not overtly address her individualism. What gets foregrounded is Arce's body/self as the instrument of her
artistic subjectivity, which frames her two visible identificational components—gender and race—at times as supplementary, at other times as primary to her self-imaging. Her own status as an other subject is treated as a given—a sight plainly to be seen—which heightens the stake of her self performance. In my view, pivotal to Arce's selfrepresentation in *Lip Sync* is her simultaneous claim to the particular and the universal. Her synoptic actions seem to be anchored in her sexualized and racialized identity as a Latina artist, yet these actions are also global and ambiguous enough to unmoor the significance of her specific identity. As there is no verbal script that roots her actions in a specific scenario, the artist could be performing herself or performing another character who happens to engage in the represented activities.

The first image of an eye animated by amplified heartbeats highlights vision and the heart as the origins and grounding of Arce's artistic subjectivity. This artist's eye counters her spectators' voyeurism with her own voyeurism, turning her viewing others into her objects of desire, curiosity, aversion, contemplation, and surveillance. Her authorial spectatorship announces the relational contract between the performance artist and her spectators as one based on visual exchange, while she simultaneously preempts the spectators' possible desires to fetishize her body. Under the aural hypnotism of the artist's virtually deified heartbeats, the viewers' vulnerability as voyeuristic objects is intensified. Thus, Arce's inaugural gestus denaturalizes her viewers' unselfconscious gazing and makes them earn their spectatorship by their sudden awareness of self-exposure.

The second extended action of smoking and waiting for the phone to ring is, in essence, gender-neutral; she could be an artist—or any other character— who happens to be caught in anticipation, measuring out her own patience by smoking. The tableau of inhaling and exhaling smoke, in the meantime, adds the sense of smell and touch to her artistic arsenal, which will eventually include her facial muscles and other sensory organs, her neck, limbs and torso, and her body eating.

The third action displays a set of visual and emotive vocabularies that externalize an internal drama of self-perception. Those corporeal vocabularies are nevertheless fleeting, indeterminate, and elusive. The performer's particular identity as an other subject exacerbates, but does not fix, the subtext of her facial inscriptions. Arce's use of the audience as her mirror that reflects her images back to herself wryly quotes Jacques Lacan's famous formulation of the mirror stage as a person's entry into the symbolic order regulated by the name-of-the-father. [24]

The fourth sequence of a figure putting on and wiping off lipstick is arguably the only action where the performer's female identity, or her socially constructed femininity, becomes the central issue under investigation. She is caught in cycles of packaging herself (wearing lipstick), failing to match her own and others' expectations of perfection (the lipstick failing to contour her lips), pursuing her pleasures anyway (smiling, flirting), getting censured— even physically punished—for her desire (being slapped), and rectifying herself for another cycle (wiping off lipstick). The use of her two hands for different functions may suggest the doubling of self and other in herself: the punishing left hand represents both her own hand and the hand of others, reinforcing the notion that social construction of femininity is at once enforced by others and internalized by the self.

The final tableau is, to me, the most mysterious, for the mango may be read as simply a luscious fruit or a symbol of indefinite associations, just as the performative act of eating may
be read in many different ways. The action resists synoptic decipherment because its seemingly transparent meaning—a woman eating—becomes interpretively opaque under the cumulative impact of the four preceding actions. I find this final image provocative precisely for its seductive elusiveness. Interestingly, Arce herself believes that the final action is the most straightforward: mango is her comfort food, bringing up nostalgia for Costa Rica and giving her recompense for daily frustrations. The eating of a mango is her simple assertion of the joy of living. Yet, by stripping off any textual reference to her photographic actions, Arce's performance opens up multiple interpretive possibilities far beyond her authorial intention.

With *Lip Sync*, Arce defines her artistic subjectivity as embodied, hence particularized, by her multiple identity components. Her textless actions, however, remain multivalent enough to encompass a broad spectrum of referential possibilities. Some of her actions seem to have stronger feminist implications, such as the emotional turbulence aroused by gazing into the mirror in the third sequence and her split between pleasure-seeking and censorious judgment in the fourth. What I call her feminist individualism is reticent, if not dormant, in this wordless series. Arce's feminist/individualist subjectivity, however, emerges as the engine and the theme of her auto-enactment in two more recent self performances, *I Have So Many Stitches That Sometimes I Dream That I'm Sick* and *Stretching My Skin Until It Rips Whole* (or *Stitches* and *Skin* for short).

Both *Stitches* and *Skin* focus intensely on sexual politics as a dominant factor in the artist's existence. These two pieces not only contest her inherited gender-role assignment, but depict the constraints and pleasures of her female sexuality. This focus on the significance of her sex/gender does not deny that her race, ethnicity, class, age, size, sexual orientation, physiological ability, and cultural heritage all have bearings on her self-formation and perceptions. It does suggest that the artist attempts to gain a better control over her material circumstances by interrogating her socialization as a gendered individual. These two feminist works reveal that Arce has transformed from assuming a class-centered community affiliation to asserting a complex gender-centered self-identification. I find her transformation inspiring, for it avows that a broadly conceived feminist inquiry remains an enabling discourse for a woman's pursuit of individual liberation.

Via her self performances, Arce also expresses her keen interest in other women's experiences as subaltern subjects. At some most intriguing moments in *Stitches* and *Skin*, Arce repositions her own racialized and sexualized body as a universal emblem for all women. Her body becomes both her own and larger than her own. This posture of doubling her body/self as simultaneously particularized (her personal property) and universalized (emblematic of all women) resembles a key device used by many North American female body artists in the 1960s and 1970s, such as Suzanne Lacy or Adrian Piper. In fact, Arce's self performances incorporate many presentational devices that both echo and adjust preexisting avant-garde conventions established in contemporary performance art, especially in the genre of feminist performances in the 1970s.

Arce emulates her feminist predecessors in taking on autobiography to unravel her engagement with the world as a female subject. She discloses a similar anxiety concerning her status as a woman artist, although she makes her individuality distinct by surveying her compound alienation as a disenfranchised Latina immigrant. Arce's investment in her body as a primary art material also echoes the method favored by many feminist artists in the 1970s.
Most North American feminist artists situate their body art within the secular context of Western art history, seeking to reverse their condition as canonized art objects by male artists to become art creators who utilize their own bodies in and as art. While Arce shares their creative ambition, she also employs her body in two paradigmatic ways: (1) as an individualistic vehicle to undo her Catholic indoctrination; (2) as a performative strategy to signify her quadruple otherness. In the first scheme, Arce's body art launches a pointblank altercation with the Catholic God, whose corpus is made of spirit rather than of flesh. Her corporeal project aims to heal the dichotomized split between body and spirit, flesh and soul, and ultimately to locate her own salvation within her individual body/self. In the second scheme, her flesh exposure literalizes her vulnerability as a dislocated, subaltern subject. Since her drive to survive by incessant adaptability often makes her defenseless, Arce compares the pain of her transculturated self to a denuding situation that subjects her unveiled skin to surveillance, salivation, and humiliation. There is, then, a contradictory thematization in Arce's use of the body: on the one hand, her body is rendered emancipatory and triumphant; on the other hand, her body is treated as abject and colonized. Such contradictions point to the very dilemma of Arce's transculturated existence, which both promises liberation and demands subordination.

Arce's immersion in various feminist tropes that resemble past U.S. performance artworks suggests the extent of her creative and politicized transculturation. But I find it even more illuminating how Arce manages to invert her own internal colonization as a Latina immigrant to assume both the role of the liberated and that of a liberator.

The Cage

Let us return to Arce's installation of a caged woman that opens Stitches, to examine her particular blend of transculturated feminism. Arce conceived this cage installation as a reprise of the extended “photographs” in Lip Sync. The structure of an artist's body caught inside a cage immediately recalls two well-known projects in contemporary performance art history: Caged (1978–79), enacted by Tehching Hsieh, an immigrant artist from Taiwan, and Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit… (1992–93), cocreated by the Cuban American artist Coco Fusco and the Mexican immigrant artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña.

In Caged, the first of Hsieh's year-long projects, the artist lives in an eighty-nine-by-twelve-foot cage in his New York loft without speaking, reading, watching TV, or engaging in any means of communication with the outside world. In my reading, the key to Hsieh's performance lies in its duration. The year-long process of solitary confinement tests the artist's endurance and dedication to his work. The cage represents both the physical frame and the symbolic incarceration entailed by his art. Yet the very constraint of freedom becomes an empowering conceit for Hsieh, who turns the cage into his self-made gallery and conceptual monastery to exhibit his life of deprivation/purification as art. He stakes out his claim in the 1970s conceptual art market with an extreme concept and executes the concept as an extreme body art, thereby making an existential gesture that actually melds his art with life. In this vein, Hsieh's Caged belongs to the same conceptual/body art universe that contains Chris Burden's daredevil projects from the 1970s.
While Hsieh's cage remains rooted in Manhattan and most of his performance is observed by himself alone, Fusco and Gómez-Peña's cage travels through natural history museums on three continents; their performances are observed by thousands of spectators, some of whom do not realize that they are watching an art project.\[27] In the role of performance artist, Hsieh presents himself as an experiencer rather than an image. How he constitutes himself visually has little bearing on his endurance event, which does not make an issue out of the artist's identity as an Asian male. Fusco and Gómez-Peña, in contrast, rely on visual representation to enact their postcolonial identity politics. Their visual strategies center around the simultaneous quotation and misquotation of racial stereotypes to display themselves as exotic images of “savage” otherness. Their piece appropriates, so as to satirize, the demeaning Western anthropological convention of exhibiting nonwhite humans in museums, carnival fairs, and other public places.

In *Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit...* Fusco and Gómez-Peña exhibit their personas in a cage as newly discovered “Amerindians from the [fictional] island of Guatinaui.” The two artists satirically don mishmash costumes of stereotypical “native” wear (straw skirt, feather hat, ornate ritualistic garb) and contemporary gear (sunglasses, sneakers, wristwatch) that violates their “primitive” façades. With the help of simulated colonial guards, the two captives offer a menu of interactions with spectators.\[28] While Fusco and Gómez-Peña adopt at times embarrassing self-display to rebuke the inhumanity of colonial voyeurism and caricature the present-day ethnographic tourism, the two artists also turn the psychosocial dynamics of coercion and complicity involved in the performance situation to their advantage. Fusco and Gómez-Peña toy with spectators by complying to their desires; the performers' very compliance mocks the spectators' willing participation in the flagrantly ludicrous acts as naive but nonetheless iniquitous colonial folly.

By tackling her own identity politics as a subaltern subject, Arce's cage installation shares more conceptual kinship with Fusco and Gómez-Peña's traveling cage than with Hsieh's immobile cube. Hsieh's piece features the artist's solitary asceticism for such a duration that it practically precludes a witnessing other's in-kind participation. In contrast, Arce's cage installation resembles Fusco and Gómez-Peña's mission of incorporating visual representation and audience response as part of the performance. Yet there are important differences. Arce's live photograph shifts the performance dynamics from active interactions between the displaying and viewing parties to an *active mystery* that draws visual attention without offering any narrative resolution. Arce instigates audience participation with an instruction that veers between supplication and demand—“feed me.”\[29] Unlike Fusco and Gómez-Peña with their cynical playfulness, Arce simultaneously resists her participants' advances by staying completely still and silent. The effect of coercion remains one-sided. The spectator is put in a position of being persuaded to contribute to the performance; the performer, however, has made her choice not to respond to any stimulus once her photographic action starts. On the one hand, the performer is fixed in an apparently disempowered position, but the spectators' own compliance indicates a concession of *their* power for the time being to *her*. On the other hand, in surrendering their partial power to participate in the artist's pre-set dramatic environment, the spectators gain back some measure of agency by becoming the actors, while the caged woman remains a set-piece, an inert component in her scenery of incarceration.
Arce's deliberate nonparticipation veils her presence in an unsettling ambivalence. Is the caged woman the one who writes, “feed me”? Is she “me,” the subject who displays herself? Or is she an object on display by her jailer, who uses the pronoun “me” half-jokingly to speak for her—as we do sometimes to speak for an infant or a pet? Is she herself the food for the viewer, who becomes the implied “me” in the action of feeding her/his eyes? Is the woman's static posture an indication of her passivity or her insubordination? Is the woman the artist? Is the artist the speechless body? Is her confined, mute body the artwork? Has the artist commodified her flesh property as a sight? Is she, caged and exposed as a spectacle, in control of her situation? Has she put herself in danger, defenseless to contingencies? Or does the cage actually frame her territory, hence serving as her sanctuary? After all, no spectator is ignorant of the art context in which the cage installation is planted. But is her image still vulnerable to the spectator's fetishistic gaze and symbolic domination? Is her attractive, nude, nonwhite body pornographic, palatable, sculptural, materialistic, clinical, or even zoological? Could we make absolute distinctions among all these attributes and their resulting affects? Need we answer all these questions to appreciate the installation? Doesn't the work's power lie in its provocative multivalence, its refusal to be clear?

“Identity is never fixed, yet it is, in asense, framed,” maintains Mary Kelly. To me, Arce's installation provides a literal figuration for Kelly's remark. Arce's exposed body, replete with visible signs of her ethnic and gendered particularities, may be seen as a means to establish her identity: there exists only one such body and that body, at least legally, belongs to her. Yet, her identity cannot be fixed, even though it is at this moment framed by the cage and by the performance situation. Indeed, neither Arce's visibility nor her framing can guarantee the intelligibility of her image/identity. In Unmarked, Peggy Phelan cautions against the intuitive equation between seeing the representation of an image and knowing the real—the “true”—meanings of the image: “Representation follows two laws: it always conveys more than it intends; and it is never totalizing. The ‘excess’ meaning conveyed by representation creates a supplement that makes multiple and resistant readings possible. Despite this excess, representation produces ruptures and gaps; it fails to reproduce the real exactly.”

The “excess meaning” maintained by Phelan as a principle of representation pinpoints the essence of what I've described as Arce's enactment of an active mystery in her cage installation: Arce's representation is a visual mystery that likely exceeds her authorial intention and certainly exceeds my verbal interpretations. But it is also a mystery that solicits interpretations because of its provocative excess. The many questions I raised above illustrate my reading of the “supplement” oozing from Arce's representational excess. No matter how many questions I raise, however, I can neither exhaust all possible questions nor provide definite answers. What Phelan observes as “ruptures and gaps” surrounding representation underscores my interpretive inadequacy, which prevents me from reaching the “truth” about Arce's identity even as I blanket her body with my vision.

Arce's iconography aggravates my interpretive inadequacy because she at once offers her body/self to be seen and refuses to be seen or known entirely. By averting her face and refraining from speech, Arce frustrates an interpreter's desire to even partially understand her, let alone penetrate her mystique. As viewers, we may scrutinize her corporeal peculiarities—her not-quite-white skin, dark straight hair, and medium stature—but we still don't know exactly who she is. The only certain information about her is given circumstantially by the art context. We know her to be an artist, but the rest of her life is barred from our seeing and
hearing. Our lack of access to what constitutes her identity is also exacerbated by Arce's removal of specific cultural signifiers such as clothing and accessories from her body to pose nude, half-concealed, mute, and immobile. We cannot anchor Arce's tableau vivant in a particular cultural context by falling back on the established ethnographic conventions and colonial mythologies exposed by a piece like Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit .... Instead, Arce's nude action more closely evokes the corporeal trope used by many women performance artists who often put their nude bodies on the line to assert the right to self-representation. The perceptible marking of Arce's ethnicity through her skin color, however, brings to the fore another framing for her identity: race. Her arrested and stationary body therefore vacillates between a generic anatomy that signals femaleness and an individualized physique that defers full comprehension.

Arce takes the risk of self-exposure to claim both artistic agency and feminist self-determination. Since she completely withholds her voice, her agency and determination may produce the contrary effects of compromising her body/self in utter passivity, if not downright subjugation. The self performance that follows Arce's live photograph, then, bears the responsibility of embodying her agency and demonstrating her determination: she must provide a voice to her own image. A prelude to an identity performance, Arce's mysterious presence in a cage succeeds—in my view—as an irresistible bait for a captured audience.

The Bathtub

A striking episode that immediately follows the cage installation shows Arce's attempt to pair her body with her voice. Epitomizing the artist's pursuit of feminist individualism, this paradigmatic episode appears in both Stitches and Skin. The author/performer conceived of the two solo pieces as “going backward deeper and deeper into the past.”[32] Like an experiential linchpin, the bathtub episode opens the earlier piece, Stitches, which deals with the artist's transcultural journey in the United States, and closes Skin, which plunges back into her Costa Rican past. Arce performs this segment inside a water-filled bathtub. A large mirror overhanging the bathtub refracts her naked action inside the tub. From the mirror, the spectators see her body convulsing and relaxing, while they hear her deliver an iridescent mishmash of monologues in a partial trance state.

The spatial iconography of this performance segment echoes Robbin Schiff's Nightmare Bathroom (1972), a mixed-media installation exhibited in the CalArts feminist art project Womanhouse. Using an actual bathroom as the site, Nightmare Bathroom restages the archetypal scene of seduction from the Bible: a sculpted woman's figure lies in a bathtub covered by frozen soapy water, as a serpent, line-drawn on the tub and floor, slithers toward her. In this nightmarish bathroom, which is painted a flat Edenic green, the woman is transfixed by the weight of her supposed transgression against the paternal code: she disobeys her God, succumbs to a stranger's seductive whispers, and turns her man, Adam, into an accomplice in committing the Original Sin. The woman is immured in her haunted bathtub because she cannot disengage herself from her patrilineage.

In contrast, Arce's bathtub is a liberating machine. It allows her first to submerge in and then to disown her ancestral pain, undertaking a performative procedure to conduct both self-birthing ritual and an auto-baptism. Immersed in the warm water, Arce's body relaxes, becomes comfortably numb, curls up into a fetal position with her chest tucked in and her
brain floating in the ether of reminiscence. She feels an acute attack of pain in her knee, in her ankle, in the bend of her elbow. She realizes that her body is traveling on a memory journey to the site of pain way beyond her personal recollection: “It isn't my pain. It was my great-great-grandfather's pain, my great-great grandmother's pain.” She revisits the tribulations endured by her ancestors, the accumulation of pain from five generations ago to the pain of childbirth. 

experienced by her mother. “Push, push, just push me out of here…. If you don't let me get out of here, I will push your lungs against your heart— ah….?” Arce's body convulses violently inside the bathtub, thrusting her thighs repeatedly upward while her chant of “push, push, just push me out of here” erupts into screams. She pushes her own body out of her mother's womb, a reenacted self-genesis that frees her from all inherited pain. She emerges as a brand new other/self who seizes her selfhood by validating her status as an other and who is able to select or jettison the genealogical bequests from her ancestors and progenitors. At the same time, Arce performs a rite of baptism, confirming her entrance into a new moral order, the autonomy and self-sufficiency endorsed by the individualistic U.S. culture. With this juxtaposition of the ritual of baptism with the labors of birthing, Arce executes a fusion of feminism with Catholic symbolism.

The Cross

Significantly, Arce selected the bathtub segment to link her 1993 Stitches to her 1994 Skin, accentuating her newly acquired individualism as both the inaugural ritual for her entry into North America and the conclusive phase in her remembrance of a Costa Rican girlhood. This arrangement suggests that Arce consciously historicizes her bathtub declaration of independence as a transitional event in her personal chronology, one that enables a shift between her collective consciousness and her emergent individualism. While she was born into a tradition that places the individual within the bound of an extended familial and cultural body, she has learned to extricate herself from that generational web in order to pursue her personal fulfillment.

The bathtub monologue defines Arce's individualist awareness as a radical turning point in her growth. Such an assertion might suggest that Arce clings to a romanticism of incessant progress and egoistic aggrandizement. The dense tonality of Stitches, however, challenges this simplistic reading, for it turns the bathtub episode into an emotional high point that compels the artist to begin her process of transculturation despite tremendous difficulties. The piece further conveys that Arce's emergent individualism has altered rather than replaced her collective consciousness. The only difference lies in how she conceives of the new collectives to which she belongs, whether they are women, immigrants, Latino/as, or the poor. In any case, Arce's self performance dramatizes her struggle to attain individualistic consciousness and to locate new cultural affiliations.

As the piece's full title, I Have So Many Stitches That Sometimes I Dream That I'm Sick, imparts, Arce's theater of transculturation sings her relocation blues. She likens her pain of immigration to a saga of mutilation, which literally and metaphorically wounds her body. She must suture her fractured flesh repeatedly in order to maintain some semblance of superficial wholeness. Still, her perception of otherness is so profound and constant that she has internalized her alienation to view her stitched-up body as
unwholesome, damaged goods—“I dream that I'm sick.” Her performance, however, aims to dissect rather than to cover up the traces of this mutilation. It pokes at her sores in an attempt to expose, hence to exterminate, her internalized otherness that sinks deep in the wounds.

*Stitches* unfolds in an internal space on two planes of reality. Symbolic actions with scattered chanting, a cappella, create a metaphysical scaffolding; within this scaffolding, vignettes about mundane encounters are presented directly to the audience. The piece's pre-performance cage installation situates the work within a feminist context. The opening ritual of self-birth cum baptism inserts this feminist installation into a modified Catholic framework. It also foreshadows the doubling of Arce's body as the flesh vessel of her individual being and the corporeal subject that approximates and eventually substitutes for the Sublime Spirit-Body of Christ.

Arce's doubling of feminism and Catholicism is eloquently acted out in a sequence that starts with a silent auction. Assuming an expressionless face and a passive stance, Arce displays her naked body (front, back, and side views) to the audience: her flesh becomes food for the spectating eyes—a theme anticipated by her cage tableau. She leaves the stage and returns to stand in front of a huge screen. She then extends her arms and ceremoniously holds a knife and a fork in each hand. Behind Arce's own bared, spread-eagled body, a rapid succession of slides is projected, exhibiting women's body parts—a leg cut, two arms burned, a torso bruised, fingers and thighs like puppets bound by threads—while she chants hauntingly, “I just want to make sure that everyone leaves here tonight with a little souvenir... souvenir... souvenir.” She alters her tone, pitch, and tempo to voice the refrain, “souvenir,” bringing forth an aural torrent to accompany the magnified sight of women's mutilation on the screen that frames her. The mosaic jeremiad produced by the slides climaxes in an icon of a blindfolded Jesus enduring the Passion on the cross, a sculpture entitled *Bondage Christ* made by Arce (fig. 18). Is Christ blind to women's sufferings? Have women's sufferings blinded Christ? Does the blindfold heighten or compromise the efficacy of the Crucifixion? Does Jesus in added bondage confirm or imperil his promised status as Christ, the Savior and Redeemer of humankind? This enigmatic icon, dangling and unresolved, nevertheless serves as a culminating point in the train of accusatory images. The rage subsides in a requiem that mixes absolution with benediction: the broken limbs are replaced by women's palms layered in various praying gestures. Arce falls silent, lowers her arms, and layers her palms to mime

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the women's praying hands projected behind her. In this richly layered episode, Arce uses her body/self to inscribe a feminist “apocrypha” that interrogates the orthodox doctrines of suffering, sacrifice, crucifixion, salvation, and redemption.[33]

The doubling of Arce's body as both her own and larger than her own also occurs in episodes with more pointed political references to her ethnic and class status. In a bathrobe Arce sits in a casual chair, chatting with the audience; her profile casts a gigantic shadow on the square of yellow light (sunlight or domestic comfort?) behind her. She is drinking a cup of coffee, which happens to be a major U.S. import item from Latin America. Smiling, she starts making horizontal circles repeatedly with her cup until the coffee spills, while she recites a litany of thanks to all those laborers associated with the coffee production, circulation, and distribution—from planters, to manufacturers, to truck drivers, to supermarket clerks. Her ritual of spinning the cup mimics the grinding of coffee beans; her meticulous recounting of the coffee commerce insists on bringing into the limelight those very personalities who have made possible this daily amenity but who will never be glamorized by ayellow-toned coffee commercial. Later on, Arce duplicates this ritual of naming the invisible contributors with an
avocado. In a scene that invites much laughter from the audience, she reverentially holds an avocado for viewing as if presenting a priceless artwork. She then gradually squishes the avocado with her hands while giving thanks to the farmers who seed the field, the pilots who fly across the borders, the grocers who neatly stack the avocados into a pyramid, and the cooks who smash avocados night after night to make guacamole. “And I have the suspicion that they all look like me,” she declares.

In these two episodes, Arce creates a mimetic ritual surrounding an “ethnic” commodity that has become associated with the invisible class of Latino/a workers. She uses the same strategy to address another sector of the Latinized labor market that has effectively commodified the human body: domestic hired help. Arce kneels on the floor with a bucket of mud, her body naked except for a pair of Walkman earphones. She breathes deeply while she smears the mud on her own body. Her breath expands in an undertone: “I hate cleaning other people's shit,” she grumbles. Her muttering explodes into a tirade that catalogs all kinds of domestic duties performed by a maid: “I hate doing the laundry. I hate doing your laundry. I hate making your bed. I hate cleaning your toilet. I hate picking up your trash.” As she keeps soiling and hitting her body with mud, Arce conjures up a scene of a maid bending her back to clean the floor until her fingers bleed and waiting for her employer to check if she has carefully erased her own fingerprints. The outrage of this scene is thus tempered by a hint of sardonic humor: a maid must secure/reproduce an immaculate scene of crime, leaving no housekeeping evidence behind. To that underlying sarcasm, Arce taunts, “People should get paid just to be alive.”

I notice that Arce's vignettes are interlaced through the logic of vicissitudes: after the trial, the simple reward; after the calm, the calamity; after the terror, the avowal. The mood transits radically, for example, after Arce's ritual of body soiling in the maid episode when she seats herself inside a basin, pouring a bucket of milk gently over her body. In this ritual of ablutions, Arce washes away the stains of survival with the flowing milk that at once soothes, nourishes, and heals. While the milk still drips from her body, she launches into an agon with the audience, oscillating between two stances: now defiant; now affable. “Don't touch me,” her voice yells, yet her fingers keep inviting. This direct address is suspended when she improvises an instant Catholic mass, swinging a sacramental vessel with incense smoking and chanting in Spanish to evoke the Trinity and Holy Mary. The next episode undercuts such solemnity with skepticism, as the artist aligns religion with commerce and tourism.

Arce, a suitcase in hand, announces that she will go “God shopping.” “God overpowers me,” she confides to the audience. “Jesus overpowers me. I overpower the rich men.” Amid the humor of such haphazard hierarchy, she confesses that she has always identified with men, because they are doing all the things she wants to do: “They won the best film at the Cannes Film Festival. They were the artists, the doctors, the scientists, the presidents. They were in my mother's eyes. They were Jesus. They were God. They have the power I want. Of course I want to be a man.”

Despite her envy for the apparent superiority and freedom of men, Arce expresses a strong ambivalence toward men as her powerful others whose privileges are ordained by the patriarchal culture. In a lengthy episode that unfolds as a drama of voices, she both portrays the abuses of male privileges (in the forms of incest, pedophilia, sexual domination, sexist conditioning, and patriarchal religion) and exposes her own complicity with the established masculocentric norms. The center of her conflict lies in her desire for corporeal pleasures, her resentment of moral condemnation of female sexuality in the secular world, and her struggle with the interdiction against fleshly abandon in the spiritual realm. Her drama of voices
wavers between dialogues of different character pairs (a little girl and her cajoler, a “nymphomaniac” and her unsympathetic confidante) and an apostrophe to God, in which the performer heately begs for forgiveness. Sporadically, the artist jumps out of her many characters to deliver an aside: “This is a survival act, you see…. It's like acting.” By casting her relationships with her male others in the mold of survival, Arce places her daily actions in a pragmatic light and reinterprets her religious faith as the constructed scene of an earnest play.

Arce's final speech/act in *Stitches* offers a culminating note to her feminist individualism: “The only thing I know for a fact is that it is my blood that pumps in my body, my blood in my veins… the th ick roots of my body. They hold me.” The proclamation revises her other-directed pragmatism/skepticism to proclaim the certainty of her own incarnated existence. If there is salvation, her speech implies, it comes from her own blood streaming in her veins rather than from the fabled sacred blood of Christ, capable of redeeming the sins of all humanity.

**The Girl-Child**

As we've seen, *Stitches* discloses the vital procedures of Arce's transculturation, including both a response to the new environment (e.g., her sociopolitical critique of North American capitalism) and a reappraisal of her native culture (her confrontation with Catholic indoctrination). In *Skin*, Arce's own family upbringing emerges as the primary target of her criticism.

The body remains a quintessential trope in this self performance, as implied by its full title, *Stretching My Skin Until It Rips Whole*. The earlier *Stitches* adopts the metaphor of mending the wounds for the sake of survival; the later piece draws from the energy of dismantling the façade that conceals, constrains, and inhibits, if also sustains, the self. Arce compares her homebound journey of remembrances to stretching the skin, as if her skin were a barrier between her present self and a past self—or rather, a series of past selves—hidden somewhere inside her body's recesses. Her Costa Rican past is then thematized as her body's hidden landscape. To return to it requires the violence of ripping her skin apart. Only through such volitional dismemberment can her present self slip underneath her skin to retrieve the sedimentary memories lodged in her flesh, viscera, and psyche.

This metaphor of excavating her body to uncover traces of the self loosely echoes the Freudian paradigm of psychoanalysis. Since *Stitches* has Marxist overtones, I find Arce's move into the “bourgeois” terrain of Freudian analysis an intriguing aspect of her ongoing transculturation. If Marx is generally read as a theorist of the world and Freud as a theorist of the self, then Arce's use of the Freudian themes in *Skin* may suggest her deeper interest in individualism. Arce herself, however, does not see these overlapping referential codes as mutually exclusive. Her commitment to social critique goes hand in hand with her desire for self-knowledge. This merging of the social and the individual, then, represents Arce's own version of the feminist personal/political conflation.

Her body as her own and larger than her own—the strategy of corporeal doubling that Arce utilizes to adazzling effect in *Stitches*—appears in the opening segment for *Skin*. Reversing her technique of silent visualization in *Stitches*, Arce first establishes her presence in *Skin* as a monologic voice but a visual absence. The floor and walls in the performance area are mostly
covered by newspapers. A mound of spread-out newspapers occupies stage center. We hear Arce's voice begin a monologue in semidarkness: “I don't want to move,” it moans. “My body doesn't make me feel safe. I'm an alien inside and out.” As we try to adjust our vision in order to hear better and to verify the source of the sound, the voice continues to question the value of embodiment: the body's susceptibility to harm, the weight of inertia, the lack of safety, the bondage of having forms—“So many forms, forms to fill, forms to follow, forms to mount, made in form. Maiden form.” Arce's device of featuring her own immaterial voice corresponds to the fear of being in touch with her body stressed by the monologue. Yet, just as her voice is at the moment ineluctably embodied, so she must accept the necessity of being “made in form.” To outlive her present traumas, she has to retrieve her body's history. The monologue further connects her fear of embodiment with her alien status, hence precipitating her escape into the past: “I don't feel safe to be here. I'm going back to where I came from.”

Arce's declaration refers to the question often heard by immigrants and ethnic minority Americans—“Why don't you go back to where you came from?” She pushes this question to its logical end by announcing that she is indeed returning to where she came from. The announcement presages her emergence into sight: Arce, in a black dress, comes out from her hideout in the newspaper mound. The ruptured surface of the newspapers alludes to the ripped skin in the piece's title. An analogy is clinched between the artist's own skin and the “skin” of the world: the local, national, and international affairs recorded in the newspapers. Arce's “inner” body is stretched to double the hidden body of the world, which contains much more than what its surface (the newspaper skin) tells. The performer's metaphorical plunge into her own ripped body—the deeper self—is thus troped as an entrance into the world, represented at the moment by her performance territory and by the spectators.

Territory and population, two things that have often driven the world into wars, are the immediate issues addressed by Arce's ceremonious entrance into sight. She stares right at the audience, her voice mocking, “Do you feel safe? You think you are safe,” then cajoling, “I need you to teach me how to be safe.” She picks up a skeletal bed frame that looks like a chain-link fence, raises the bed frame in front of herself, and moves slowly before the spectators. Her attitude becomes confrontational, demanding that the spectators leave her alone: “I need to make my space in here. I need to make my space by stealing some of yours.” “Teach me,” her voice shifts to a fierce pitch, her gaze split between provocation and introspection, “teach me how to rob you. Teach me how to invade you. Teach me how to violate you, so that you can have less what you have before, and I can have more.” She pauses, with her portable fence dividing her place from her others' place, and smiles alluringly, “We get along fine. Do you agree? I am here.”

Sandwiched between an opening monologue that announces Arce's homebound journey and the ensuing episodes rooted in an imaginary Costa Rica, this segment functions as a bridge to the past and a mirror of the artist's present condition as a subaltern subject in L.A. The refrains of “teach me,” satirical in tone, suggest that her feeling of being unsafe, her territorial impetus, even her confrontational stance, are all learned from her oppressors—the “you” in her address. If her aggressive rhetoric verges on a colonial intent, she places the responsibility on those who teach her this domineering tool. Her strategy here goes against African American feminist Audre Lorde's famous warning that one cannot use the master's tool to dismantle the master's house.[35] Instead, Arce's tactic resembles what Diana Taylor analyzes as a method of transculturation used by the Peruvian ethnographer and novelist José María...
Arguedas: “appropriating the signs and symbols of the other to express the world-view of the now defining self."[36] Arce's last remark in this segment further raises the political stake of her presence, first referring to Rodney King's question “Can we all get along?” after the 1992 civic unrest and then confirming the irreversible fact of her own residence in L.A.: “I am here.”

To my ears, what remains unacknowledged verbally in Skin is that the performer has also learned from her “oppressors” the very medium that empowers her to carve out her presence in a theatrical realm, to convey her autobiographical stories to curious witnesses, and to assert her autonomy and worth as an independent performance artist. The master's tool may at different moments oppress and liberate the enslaved; sources of enlightenment can come from the least expected agents. The postcolonial cultural critic Gayatri Spivak has commented on the complex dynamics of oppression/liberation by describing her childhood education in India. An (upper-caste) Hindu child, Spivak was taught in a Westernized school by (lower-caste) tribal Christians, “who were converted to Christianity from ‘below’ turn[ed] ‘outside’ the recognized religions of India.” “In situations like that,” Spivak reflects, “one begins to realize without realizing the extraordinary plurality of the source of enlightenment; in the very long haul, the general sources of our enlightenment were our race enemies.”[37] I find Spivak's candid comment illuminating for Arce's work. Arce's self performance itself stands as evidence of how much she has benefited from her transculturation—unless, of course, she were to argue that the very act of not acknowledging one's debts is also a lesson learned from the ruling class. In any case, Arce's polemic stance against the audience in the initial two episodes of Skin quickly shifts as she delves into her Costa Rican past. For the rest of the piece, she relates to the audience more as a storyteller to her interested listeners than as an alien guest to her complacent hosts. The targets of Arce's critique are transferred to her memory territory: the phantasmic past buried in her deeper self.

Arce's imaginary homebound journey dramatized in Skin takes the form of a dissection into her matrilineage, the bloodline passed on to her from the three women most intimate to her youth: her maternal grandmother, Helia; her paternal grandmother, Carmen; and her mother, who remains unnamed throughout the piece. This focus on her matrilineage is consonant with the well-honed feminist device of bringing to light the neglected stories of ordinary women. Arce's portrayal of her relationships with these women, however, recalls an observation offered by the Indian American feminist Uma Narayan as a phenomenon common to many Third World feminists. Narayan identifies herself as a Third World feminist because she spent her first quarter of a century in Third World countries. She argues that a significant part of her sensibilities and her political horizon are indelibly shaped by Third World realities. In this sense, Narayan's background may shed light on Arce's, for Arce also spent most of her formative years in a Third World country. In Narayan's words:

I would argue that, for many of us, women in different parts of the world, our relationships to our mothers [have] an interesting resemblance to our relationships to the motherlands of the cultures in which we were raised. Both our mothers and our mother-cultures give us all sorts of contradictory messages, encouraging their daughters to be confident, impudent, self-assertive and achieving, even as they attempt to instill conformity, decorum, and silence, seemingly oblivious to these contradictions.[38]
The performance contestation in *Skin* is fueled precisely by Arce's rage against those contradictory messages given by the mothers in her life and by the mother-culture that raised her for more than two decades.

In telling stories about these women who ushered her into a prejudicieridden mother-culture, Arce maintains a present-tense connection with her spectators, enticing them to be her secret-sharers. Sporadically, she slips into a representational mode, applying a wide range of vocal delivery and pitches to embody different attitudes and personalities, twisting her head to opposite sides for dialogues between herself and the other character. Arce creates a visual emblem, a gestus, or a choreographed sequence for each episode to epitomize the particular woman under portrayal or to comment on her own “inheritance” from that woman. She sits breaking bread into a bucket to talk about Grandma Helia, who once raised eighty-five cats in one room and was able to call all her pets by their individual names (fig. 19). The same grandma who hosted a miniature zoo for domestic animals died disinheritting her granddaughter because of her disobedience.

Arce walks about the stage, scattering the bread crumbs as food for animals and squealing as if she were calling to a horde of chickens, geese, and pigs. Her attitude toward Grandma Helia's middle-class indulgence of animals is clear in the next episode, as she lifts a dead chicken upside down, pulls out its feathers with force, and repeatedly chants the curses of the underclass: “hungry, hungry, very hungry”; “no soap, no soup… growing mushrooms”; “broken pipes… paper, paper, everywhere,” “fascism, fascism, fascism.” A window-size photograph of Grandma Helia projected on the wall seems to witness her granddaughter's action with disapproval (fig. 20). This window to a fractious past dissolves into a door of buoyant colors with a standing woman's figure in it: Grandma Carmen.

“I didn't see my grandma Carmen much,” Arce whispers, “because she is an Indian.” With this hushed admission of the racism that existed within her family, Arce begins putting on layers of bras and corsets on top of her dress,
way. Arce's lineage from Carmen, however, won her reprimands from her other grandma whenever she was caught sitting with legs apart: “Don't sit in that Indian position.” As if to exorcise that racist/sexist prohibition, Arce pays a belated homage to Grandma Carmen by beating out a rhythm with her voice—“bo bean, bo bong”—and dancing sensuously with a big round mirror. Amid luminous patterns of refraction radiating from her dancing figure, Arce turns the mirror around to be her silver platter and pulls out her naked breasts as offerings: “I can serve my breasts on a platter,” she teases the audience humorously, “Oh yap, they are looking at you. They are shy. They want me to touch them.”

Arce's feminist individualism emerges as a corollary text in the episode about her mother. On a makeshift table covered by newspapers, Arce props up two framed photographs: one a portrait of her mother, the other of her baby self. “When I look back, the only image I see is my mother. I am determined, 'Don't be like her.'” Arce reinforces her fierce declaration by drawing two diagonal lines across her mother's image with a lipstick. The segment portrays the artist's ambivalence toward her mother as a conflict between her mother's conformity and her own independence. Whereas the mother is locked in her frigidity and reservation, the daughter craves vitality, expression, and self-fulfillment.

Arce's excruciating monologue evolves from a terse dialogue with her mother to the narration of a dream, in which she offers an imaginary daughter everything that she always wanted from her mother: avowals of love rather than routine breakfasts, sexual freedom rather than repression, self-confidence rather than shame about the color of her skin (fig. 22). Seemingly muted by Arce's fury, her mother is allowed to speak only three times: twice announcing breakfast and once suggesting that “one should have children in order to have something to live for.” Although her dream about child-rearing comes from the influence of her mother's remark, Arce specifically criticizes the older

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woman's logic of building a life around one's children as a selfish act—“I said live your own life, Mom, leave mine alone.” Describing how she would cherish her imaginary daughter, the artist pours a pitcher of milk systematically over her own baby picture. She addresses her imaginary daughter fervently: “stand up for yourself…. Fulfill all your dreams, don't let anybody or anything stop you, not even me!…get me out of the way!” Arce punctuates her address by hammering her mother's photograph to smithereens.

It is impossible to verify the “truth” of Arce's memories or to construct a fleshed-out impression of a mother based on a daughter's representation— just as it wouldn't be possible for me to prove the veracity of my subjective account of Arce's piece. What is palpably displayed in Skin are the remnants of traumatic growth, indicting the family setting as the social organ that ensures, dominates, and in various ways distorts an individual's acculturation. Arce's accusation of the immediate caretakers of her girlhood reaches a sense of pathos when she turns her matriphobic antagonism into disparaging selfdoubt. She questions her mirror image, again using this optical instrument as a tool of internalized social judgment: “Just who the fuck do you think you are? You're nothing but the token of the twentieth century. An avant-garde alien that hasn't found a labeled coffin yet. A mute immigrant suffering from a tongue transplant.” Arce nevertheless does not consent to closing her performance
on a note of self-condolence: “I am. And with my broken Spanish and English, I surrender and I speak up.”

In a gesture of coming to peace with her psychic wounds, Arce simulates the sacrament of the Eucharist, turning the former bucket of animal feed into her consecrated bread, while chanting in Spanish her praises for Santa Maria. The ritual culminates in the bathtub scene, where she annunciates her own rebirth as an independent being by disowning all her ancestral pain.

**Emancipatory Montage**

I experience the pleasure of watching Arce's performance from her superb montage of specificity, ambiguity, complexity, and iconoclastic inventiveness. She introduces a high degree of aesthetic rigor by pairing precise visual emblems with richly layered themes. She further conveys such conceptual precision with a visceral intensity that perforates the entire performance space. Take, for example, my favorite scene from *Stitches*, in which she stands naked, holding a fork and a knife in outstretched arms. Arce evokes the rite of Eucharist by doubling her body as the corpus of the suffering Christ, yet she undercuts the sanctity of her metonymically consecrated flesh by screening female bodies under duress. This documentary of a virtual gender carnage nonetheless becomes dislodged from its accusatory feminist context when the iconography of the Crucifixion appears. The redemptive value associated with that theological
representation renders the purpose of Christ's agony equivalent with that of women's sufferings. Are women then saviors of the world? Does their mutilation serve a similar teleological design within the Catholic Providence? Is Christ's Passion necessarily superior to mortal women's passions? Recall that Arce further defamiliarizes these associations by presenting a blindfolded figure of Christ. I have already raised several questions concerning this enigmatic iconography, and I add a couple here: Is the blindfold a sign of impotence or of indifference? Does it signify that Jesus cannot see or that He is unwilling to see the tortures borne by the female flesh? In either scenario, Jesus cannot be Christ the Messiah. Salvation then lies elsewhere.

Adding to this metaphysical context is a socioeconomic one: the mystical reverberations are simultaneously disturbed by Arce's scripture of transnational commerce refrained on “souvenir.” The word foregrounds her specific background as a Latina and her own possible status as a pawn within the dominant form of cultural exchange between North and South America: tourism. The souvenirs that Arce insists the viewers take away are their memories of the artist's body turned into a visual sacrifice, an imago that urges them to think about the underside of tourism—prostitution, economic colonization, and exoticized/eroticized racism. This specific reference to her cultural traumas is reinforced by the next segment of herself as an immigrant maid who has to thank her employer for her bleeding fingers. Arce then quickly reclaims her self-agency by performing the rite of a milk ablution, a curative ritual that substitutes the grace of Christ's sacred blood with the power of women's regenerative care, symbolized by the milk.

Arce's solo performances investigate the emancipatory potential of individual determination, which transforms her victimhood into the very impetus for self-renewal. Her art advocates a survival ethos, attempting to turn the performance process into a healing venture. As Arce mentioned, the most important goal for her when performing solo is to undergo “a real-time experience, right there, in front of and with the audience.” Without this experience of “transcendence and catharsis,” Arce emphasizes, she considers her performance a failure even if she has recited every line and hit every cue. If I may interpret Arce's desired “experience” as the actual rush of emotional intensity triggered by her actions, then her performative objective may be understood as the perception of transformation and purgation associated with catharsis. She attempts

to turn the duration of carrying out her wrenching vignettes into a process that may produce catharsis in herself and in her audience.

Arce's take on catharsis, resembling her other transculturated performance concepts and strategies, at once appropriates and modifies Aristotle's audience-centered theory of catharsis. She brings to the fore the performer's inner psychosomatic changes as a crucial function in undertaking a dramatic action. We may of course criticize Arce’s proclaimed goal of catharsis as the measure for a satisfactory performance. After all, Aristotle's theory, including his concept of katharsis, has been subject to intense critique from a Third World perspective by the Brazilian theater artist Augusto Boal. Still, I find it more stimulating to heed the diversity of aesthetic judgment, conceptual standard, and individual aspirations that the artist brings to bear on her performances than to judge her theoretical presumptions by prevalent discourses, whether progressive or conservative. Arce's art exceeds what can be theorized properly.
Arce's feminist performances cannot be separated from her purpose of cultural validation. In an era when multiethnic and transcultural existence has become increasingly a given for many, if not all, L.A. inhabitants, Arce's art practice exemplifies the potential efficacy of performance as a rooting discourse. It speaks to the desire for a performative closure of (self) cure, even when it maintains the suspense of cultural protest and individual rebellion.

5. A Hetero-locus in Process

Self Performances at Highways

A Xenometer by Default

On the floor of a public elevator lies a strange package, fully wrapped in a floral-patterned batik crisscrossed by ropes. The package looks suspiciously like a human figure, though there is no external sign to verify its status. What is it? Why is it here? Who put it here? For whom is it waiting? Does it have permission to be here? Has the proper authority been notified? If the figure is a human body, is it alive or dead, breathing or rotting away? Is it hungry, angry, sick, in pain? Can it talk, move, make sound? During the twenty-four hours that the bundle parks in the elevator, many people attempt to decipher its mystery. Few notice an obscure text attached to the wall that reads, “Moving to another country hurts more than moving to another house, another face, another lover…. In one way or another we all are or will be immigrants. Surely one day we will be able to crack this shell open, this unbearable loneliness, and develop a transcontinental identity.” Does this text refer to the silent bundle on the floor? Unable to reach a definite conclusion, someone kicks the package; another fondles it; a few confess to it; many curse it. A dog pees on it. Suddenly screams in Spanish break out when a frustrated elevator passenger threatens to stab it/him. Left alone and mute from now on, the cocooned body/person stays until it/he is evacuated by security guards and

A melancholic tone and a sense of catatonia pervade Gómez-Peña’s *The Loneliness of the Immigrant* (*Loneliness*, for short); it is an extended happening, bordering between a body act and a redressive performance. Gómez-Peña was among L.A.’s first immigrant artists to work in the medium of live art. He moved from Mexico to this city in 1978 to study post-studio art in CalArts and soon began staging guerrilla performances in unlikely sites, such as the public elevator in *Loneliness* or a spot at the southern edge of Interstate 5, where he screamed at the cars moving toward Mexico to save him from “cultural shipwreck,” or an open stool in a public bathroom at CalArts, where, fully clothed, he sat on a toilet for twenty-four hours and read an epic poem about his journey to North America in Spanglish.[2]

Like Suzanne Lacy, Gómez-Peña assumes the role of a public intellectual and cultural commentator in his work as an artist. His art encompasses multiple media, including writing, performance, radio, video, and journalism. He is an indefatigable chronicler of his own artworks, often revising previous documents about his art projects and personal histories in subsequent publications. A pioneering theorist on multicultural performance, Gómez-Peña has articulated “a multicentric, hybrid” vision of American culture at the turn of the millennium.[3] He has also brought into common usage a descriptive label coined for his ongoing art/cultural practice: “border art,” which deals specifically with the socioeconomic and political tensions at the Mexico-U.S. border and metaphorically with the dynamics of boundary crossing among discrete entities.[4]

Gómez-Peña did not use the term “border art” to characterize his work until he started collaborating in 1984 with the multiethnic ensemble, the Border Arts Workshop/El Taller de Arte Fronterizo (BAW/TAF), based in the border regions between San Diego and Tijuana. I suggest, however, that the genre “border art” may be applied retrospectively to a piece like *Loneliness* because it deals with the Mexican artist's psycho-physiological trials in crossing the national border. The work is also planted in an in-between place, an elevator that borders on momentary pause and transitory passage. Moreover, *Loneliness* experiments with what Gómez-Peña describes as “the notion of performing for ‘involuntary audience.’ ”[5] The artist confronts an audienceship at the blurred juncture of quotidian behaviors and intentional activities, immersing all present in the liminal state of the border.

Among his early performances that have tackled what I might call “border spectatorship,” Gómez-Peña attributes a seminal significance to *Loneliness*. He documents *Loneliness* as “a metaphor of painful birth into a new country, a new identity—Chicano—and a new language—intercultural performance.” He further notes the purpose of enacting *Loneliness* by citing from his own diary kept at the time: “As a new immigrant, I hope this piece will help to transform insensitive views on immigration.”[6] According to the artist's historicization, then, *Loneliness* provides the scene of genesis for his entry into the United States as a Chicano performance artist whose work investigates the politics of immigration.

If immediate cultural transformation is the stated goal for *Loneliness*, then I believe that Gómez-Peña's action both succeeds and fails. Its success in communicating an emotional dejection, plunging the involuntary viewers into an affective state usually recognized as “loneliness.” This visceral encounter might inspire empathy from the viewers, urging them to reconsider their attitudes toward an alien other, be it a bewildering package/object or a strange person/subject. The piece nevertheless fails at the point where its success lies: the equivocal silence that embodies the artist's loneliness, which defies verbal communication and defers interpretive exchange. As a result, *Loneliness* leaves out the necessary mechanism of
intervention: a stance that activates dialogue among participants. Such an interventionist stance, I argue, requires the artist to avow his/her cultural location and political investment to either a voluntary or an involuntary audience. In contrast, *Loneliness* employs a strategy of silence, refusing any dialogue with an involuntary audience.

But is there something other than silence that avows the artist's political stance in *Loneliness*? Certainly the text on the wall is designed to situate the performance in a thematic context. Yet I don't think that correspondence between a meditative text and a silent action is ever assured. Most spectators' insensitive responses to the performer, in fact, attest to the indeterminacy that marks the linkage between the text and the performer in *Loneliness*. I suspect that the text played an insignificant role in the original performance, for Gómez-Peña neglects to note its presence in descriptions of the work in at least three different essays. The only mention of the text on the wall exists in a caption for a documentary photograph. This slippage suggests that the text did not make much of an impression on most viewers. Besides, the artist has placed more emphasis on resisting articulation than on clarifying his action.

If the first rule of practicing politics is the articulation of explicit meanings from an openly identified position, then the politics of *Loneliness* remains mute, blocked, or indirect. Gómez-Peña refrains from enunciating a particular position from which his art speaks. He declines to “crack his shell open”—to cite from his text on the wall. An unsuspecting viewer, for example, might choose to tolerate the unfamiliar sight in the elevator and then forget about it, without connecting the object seen to the emotional state of loneliness and the pressing issue of immigration. Although the text on the wall may frame the artist's contestation, it can only become part of the performance if it is noticed as a reference to the artist's action and not disregarded as a negligible flyer in a public elevator. While the artist's resolute silence expresses the pain of his transnational migration, the same silence also cuts loose the already tenuous link between the text and the image.

Neither the artist's anonymity nor his vulnerability can promote the political efficacy of *Loneliness*. Thus, Gómez-Peña's wish “to transform insensitive views on immigration” can only be a projection during his mute protest in an accidental site. Indeed, as involuntary spectators, the security guards chose to dump the mute package into a bin. Gómez-Peña's voiceless image was perceived to be “disposable.” Under the circumstances, I don't think the artist can blame his “culpable” spectators for lack of understanding, since he has created a situation adverse to developing mutual understanding. Given the prevailing elusiveness, the unprepared spectators might even interpret the piece as a mimicry of urban transience and instant oblivion, epitomizing the postindustrial apathy.

My criticism of *Loneliness* for failing to ensure immediate cultural transformation does not repudiate its potential to produce cultural transformation. In fact, I would argue that *Loneliness* does have a great potential to produce certain cultural transformations through the artist's post-performance reflections. Although the artist cannot control how his involuntary spectators receive his anonymous performance, he regains a measure of control by documenting the work and circulating the documentation in the culture-at-large. Gómez-Peña's post-rationalization gives his esoteric live performance a suggestive title and contextualizes his art action in the specific political, socioeconomic, and cultural phenomena of immigration in
L.A. His textual reiteration of a past performance exposes his art to a cultural arena far beyond the confined elevator space where his performance took place. It offers what I described in Chapter 3 as the “tertiary, virtual audience”—those who learn about Loneliness from the artist's various testimonies in print—an opportunity to contemplate the implications of his guerrilla enactment. It is through such contemplation, guided by the artist's utterance of his identity, politics, and enacted themes, that Loneliness becomes a redressive cultural event, one that may indeed “transform insensitive views on immigration.”

By stressing this postponed cultural impact of Loneliness, I do not deny that some of its immediate spectators may have been deeply affected by the piece. I only wish to analyze more closely how a work like Loneliness accomplishes the artist's projected goal of cultural redress. How does it acquire rather than lose its conceptual resonance when a specific semantic frame is cemented to the action? To me, Gómez-Peña's silent action becomes richer when it is anchored with explicit meanings: those reference points that tell us about his culture of origin, his immigrant status, his role as an artist, his incommensurable loneliness, and his desire to confront these traumas in an endurance body act. As a reader/tertiary spectator, I am enabled by my knowledge of these reference points to conduct a more nuanced interpretation. The performance hereupon re-endowed with a particular meaningfulness opens up rather than closes my responses to it. It's worth emphasizing that my interpretive exchange with the piece begins at the moment I am allowed access to my agency as a conscious and voluntary reader; I understand more when I am not deprived of certain crucial information to begin with.

Once I become aware of the work's meaningfulness captured by its title, The Loneliness of the Immigrant, how can I reread Gómez-Peña's conceptual/body act? First, I know that the package in the elevator is a named artist: Guillermo Gómez-Peña. I also know that his performance is simultaneously a poetic ritual, a conceptual/body art project, and a political protest. Considering that the artist is a Mexican immigrant, I may judge his solitary body act to be a self performance, a public action executed by an artist/author concerning his identity and autobiographical experiences. For the cluster of images in Loneliness centers around a carefully selected signifier: the indigenous Mexican Indian fabric that cocoons the performer. Gómez-Peña demonstrates the vulnerability of an immigrant from a relatively subjugated country by putting his body on the line, exposing himself to danger and ridicule at any given performative moment. He compares his solitude in L.A. to a state of mummification in which no communication with the outside world—aside from screams under crisis—is possible. The visual design of Loneliness symbolizes a paradox that Gómez-Peña experiences daily: the doubling of his physical visibility (as an un/desirable object) and cultural invisibility (as an artistic subject). The floral patterned shroud alludes to his Mexican appearance/skin, which veils his artistic subjectivity. The artist further exacerbates the claustrophobic scenario by occupying, uninvited and conspicuous, a transitional vehicle not meant for loitering. His action becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, ending with his deportation from a public property that can no longer extend admittance to him. Unnamed and disdained, the performer's alien presence is treated as unsightly garbage that must be disposed of.

Gómez-Peña's tactic in Loneliness resembles the personal/political strategy introduced by feminist performance. Effacing the border between the public and the private, the artist stages a happening that flagrantly disrupts the routine paths of random viewers who chance upon his presence in the elevator. The performance's iconography mimics the triangular dilemma from which he chronically suffers. The dilemma is public (sociopolitical) in origin; it has an ignominious name, “racism”; yet it produces an emotional aftermath profoundly private
Gómez-Peña both manifests and experiences this dilemma as a homeopathic art medicine, seemingly injecting a dose of loneliness into his body so as to attack his festering Loneliness. This infectious dilemma displays its triple components in his solo action: the Indian fabric, the hidden but present performing body, and the found public site. These elements are metaphors for the artist's existential condition; they also form the structure of a corporeal task that he must carry out during performance.

Out of the interstice between the metaphorical and literal dimensions of this performance emerges the portrait of an artist as an immigrant. Because of his dark skin, Gómez-Peña's body/subject seems artificially split in two. The outer layer contributes to his oppression in a country that has maintained an implicit skin-color hierarchy; the inner core endures the pain of alienation, muteness, and misrecognition. Gómez-Peña translates this synthetic split into the tension between his anonymous Indian covering and his body, which the covering both disguises and stifles. He raises the stakes by performing in an enclosed nonart site, doing without the safety of a cultural frame. As he marks a temporary territory with his anomalous presence, he also exposes his body to the contingent violence of insulted viewers. In order to intensify the visceral impact, Gómez-Peña builds his live action on his viewers' ignorance of the authorial intention. The relatively unmediated responses from the viewers therefore become the piece's interactive contents, turning the elevator into a virtual xenometer to gauge the occupants' xenophobic sentiments.

Loneliness communicates its pathos because there is no possible communication between the artist and spectators. Gómez-Peña precludes the empathic interactivity with his spectators by making his own readable body disappear from sight. He allows his non/presence to contaminate the nonidentity of a functional space, yet disallows his involuntary witnesses from eavesdropping on his interior monologue. His refusal to engage his others on the level simultaneously aggravates his own isolation, reiterates the trope of loneliness, and forces his own drama of impotence upon those who happen to notice him. Through a gesture of autistic renunciation, Gómez-Peña becomes the artist in control by partially surrendering his control to the viewers, making them accomplices to his immediate experiences (of being gazed upon, urinated on, threatened, cajoled, and ejected).

Loneliness enables Gómez-Peña to execute a border-busting body act with two performative devices: the rhetoric of hyperbole and the strategy of inversion. The piece turns the artist's alienation into a hyperbolic trope by packaging his body/subject as an anomaly, whereby he both reexperiences his marginalization to an amplified degree and induces his spectators' potential (hostile) reactions. In this respect, his performance strategy is both self-oriented and highly manipulative. He subjects his body to potential danger so as to purge his traumas of immigration/racism; he manipulates his accidental viewers' ignorance so as to expose that they are, to varying degrees, xenophobic. He depends on his involuntary audience to prove the veracity and urgency of his performance and to claim that being an immigrant is truly lonely. From an alternative perspective, Gómez-Peña's self-centered and manipulative strategy in Loneliness is an extreme redressive measure for a difficult dilemma. It serves to invert the racist power imbalance that the artist cannot avoid experiencing in "real life" simply by being who he is. His hyperbolic disguise in Loneliness alters this condition of irrefutable marginalization because he becomes the one in the know who refuses to let others know him. A solitary self performance, Loneliness thrives on a spectacle of accusation.
I must reiterate two important premises here: (1) my reading of *Loneliness* would not be possible without the contextual clues offered by Gómez-Peña’s post-performance recollections, and (2) my reading's reliance on the artist's textual supplement to his originary performance highlights the logic of exclusion that underscores *Loneliness*.

The first premise suggests that Gómez-Peña recognizes the value of communication in maximizing the potential cultural impact of his performance. Through documentation, he reaches for a community of tertiary spectators who may be affected, provoked, and transformed by his identity performance. The second premise, however, discloses his contradictory desire in *Loneliness*, which obtains its theatrical pathos by forfeiting communication between the performer and the immediate viewers. In other words, Gómez-Peña redresses his own sense of exclusion through the practice of exclusion in *Loneliness*, which pits the lonely performer against the ignorant, mostly antagonistic, and potentially violent others in a transitory public site. His mute non/presence therein turns an unmarked vehicle into a contaminated “xenoelevator,” inhabited by an exemplary mass of oppressive personalities. The allegory at work in *Loneliness* is palpable: the Latino artist is “the immigrant”; his silence embodies the pain of deterritorialization; his spectatorial others are the invaders of a territory already occupied by him (he was there in the elevator first, just as Mexicans were settlers in Aztalán[7] first); his elevator site is the L.A. that discriminates against him for his Indian skin. Palpable and, to a certain extent, justifiable, this allegory is at the same time a ruse set up by the artist, who illustrates his own lack of community by having first excommunicated his contiguous, cohabiting others.

**A Counterprecedent**

I have selected *The Loneliness of the Immigrant* as the inaugural performance for this chapter neither to expose Gómez-Peña’s “ruse” nor to undermine the emotional poignancy and conceptual complexity of this fascinating piece. On the contrary, I regard *Loneliness* as a provocative self performance precisely because it is flawed, which allows generous space for subsequent discussion. After all, what is a ruse but a conceptual stratagem that refrains from spelling out its full name—that is, until the moment of eventual disclosure? In this sense, I am also guilty of exploiting *Loneliness* as my ruse, with which I foreshadow what is yet to come, both in the performance history of L.A. and in the present chapter: the theatrical and autobiographically based self performances enacted by (variously disenfranchised) other subjects. Since this solo mode, which became popular at the turn of the 1990s, has attracted artists and nonartists alike from a variety of causes, disciplines, and communities, I call it “multicentric self performance,” to distinguish it from the feminist self performance in the 1970s. I cite *Loneliness* as a counterprecedent because the piece anticipates the rise of identity performance by other subjects in later decades, yet its conceptual premises appear opposite to those used by subsequent self performances. Simply put, multicentric self performances have both inherited and reversed the strategies featured in *Loneliness*.

As a precedent, even a counter one, *Loneliness* succeeded in charting out a conceptual territory that would be remapped by multicentric self performances. The tools passed on from *Loneliness* include (1) the utilization of the artist's body as both the instrument and material of performance; (2) the blurring of representational distinctions between the performer's autobiographical identity and that of the enacted role—the artist/performer as the me of
the featured persona; (3) the investigation of the artist's subaltern subjectivity at the intersection where her/his self confronts the others, a random assemblage of spectators emblematic of the world. Despite their diversity, multicentric self performances consistently resort to this triple legacy from Loneliness, employing the artist/author as the performer, the artist's autobiography as the primary text, and the artist's interface with a live audience as the performance context.

In what ways, then, do multicentric self performances counter the strategies used in Loneliness? The key revision, I suggest, lies in the conceptualization of community, which affects not only the artists' chosen methods of communication but their attitudes toward the spectators. Loneliness hinges on the sorrows of Gómez-Peña, the other/self exiled from his home community. The emotional continuum in his overwhelming pathos breaks down into four themes: the artist's loss of home/land owing to cultural displacement, his utter disempowerment because of deterritorialization, a stifling sense of invisibility resulting from his abject otherness within a hostile environment, and his state of catatonia due to internalized oppression. As we shall see, each of these four emotional themes is revised by a proactive—optimistic and/or utopian—strategy in the seven counterexamples in this chapter.

The four respective counterstrategies featured in most multicentric self performances involve (1) the search for and construction of an alternative home, an alternative community based not on blood but on affinities; (2) the artist's self-empowerment by claiming her/his (human) right to certain entitlements, thereby engaging in conceptual reterritorialization; (3) an investment in visibility to uncover the artist's supposed “abject otherness” as a xenophobic social construction; and (4) a reliance on the artist's voice to dismantle her/his internalized oppression and to denounce the external perpetrators of oppression. These revisionary strategies beckon to the possibility of creating an imaginary community, a mobile, immediate, if temporary, home for the other/self, the subaltern artistic subject, through and during self performance.\[8\]

In so far as home is the locus where a self finds both physical accommodation and emotional settlement, the site of performance becomes foregrounded in a work that explores the state of being home. The performance site, interwoven by the physical space and the designated time, becomes literally and metaphorically the artist's home for the moment. As a place that permits selfexpression, the performance site provides the artist the here-and-now of a home territory. As an ideal of homeness where the deterritorialized other/ self becomes momentarily cohered, rooted, and settled, the performance site represents the there-and-then of a destination, locatable in a nostalgic past or in a projected future. In each case, creating a home out of the performance site compels the artist to undertake several procedures, similar to those we undertake to personalize

our homes, arranging furniture and necessities around. These procedures enable the artist to exercise control over the performance space/time; to suffuse the performance site with traces of her/his selfhood, which is marked by her/his otherness; and to solicit and mobilize the immediate others—the voluntary audience—as those who make the performance site home: the affective community that supports, sustains, desires, tolerates, and witnesses the performer in a self-revealing action.

In contrast to Gómez-Peña's experiment with an involuntary audience and a surprise public site in Loneliness, multicentric self performance artists often enter into a contract of mutuality
with their spectators. The spectators come to the performance with prior consent, knowing full well what to expect. The performance site is now inhabited by a consenting community, including an artist who variously exposes, interrogates, and produces her/his self/otherness and the witnessing others. It becomes in effect a locus that accommodates, displays, anatomizes, and manufactures otherness. This locus is antithetical to what I've described as Gómez-Peña's xenometer or xeno-elevator, the stage where he enacts Loneliness. I shall name this home/site for multicentric self performances a hetero-locus, the site—which is always a space particularized by time—for difference, otherness, heterogeneity, and multicentricity.

**Utopia, Heterotopia, Hetero-locus**

Michel Foucault in his essay “Of Other Spaces” maintains that we now exist in “the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed.” He argues that we experience the contemporary world less as “a long life developing through time” than as “a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein.” Reviewing the transforming concepts of space through history, Foucault analyzes that the Middle Ages postulated “the space of emplacement,” which consisted of “a hierarchic ensemble of places.” In the seventeenth century Galileo dissolved the medieval space of emplacement when he envisioned an infinitely open space, in which “a thing's place was no longer anything but a point in its movement.” Thus, Galileo substituted the space of extension for that of localization. In our present epoch, Foucault argues, the space of extension has been replaced by that of site, which is “defined by relations of proximity between points or elements.”

Foucault further indicates two main types of external sites, the utopia and the heterotopia, which “have the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect”: one type is “utopias” and the other “heterotopias.” As perfect, fantastic, or inverted sites, utopias are unreal spaces, existing in nowhere. Heterotopias, in contrast, are real places that exist as “counter-sites,” simultaneously representing, contesting, and inverting all other conventional sites. Foucault then posits five principles to establish his “heterotopology,” a taxonomy of diverse spatial types for heterotopias, including their universality among world cultures, their transforming functions during different historical periods, their ability to juxtapose several incompatible sites in a single real place, their links to “heterochronies,” which are “slices in time,” and their system of “opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable.”

I borrow Foucault's principles for heterotopias to substantiate my concept of the hetero-locus, yet I would distinguish these two terms by their scopes of concern. As opposed to Foucault's claim of universality and historicity for the heterotopia, I enlist the word “locus” to stress the specific, localized quality of the hetero-locus as a functional paradigm for a particular site in L.A., Highways Performance Space. A city of fabled mobility, rootlessness, high capital circulation, race-and class-based segregation, and sociogeographic dispersal, L.A. has the reputation of being a heteropolis without history, memory, home. In this specific local context, the existence of Highways supplies the antidote of affective community in a landscape of quicksilver human encounters. My nomination highlights Highways' heterogeneity (i.e., the diverse cultures represented there), its otherness (presenting artistic subjects from disenfranchised communities), and its time-animated locality (people
congregating during certain designated hours for performances, discussions, and workshops). As a hetero-locus, Highways encompasses and modifies all three spatial notions—the medieval, the Galilean, the contemporary—delineated by Foucault. Highways is a space of emplacement, localized but not hierarchical or exclusive in its management. Highways is also a space of extension, its spatial qualities shifting with different time-designated events. Moreover, Highways is a heterogeneous site, combining in one place the functionality of multiple spatial agents, including a theater, a gallery, a community center, and a performance art school.

Foucault's heterotopology focuses on contestation. The Foucauldian heterotopias contest and alter the normative set of relations that define conventional sites, such as an office or a supermarket, even when these heterotopias simultaneously refer to and are connected with those spaces. Like all heterotopias, the hetero-locus called Highways contests other normative art exhibition sites, because its formation critiques the rigidity and commercialism of L.A.'s cultural infrastructure. While contestation remains a part of Highways' agenda, the place also fulfills the proactive function of redress, providing room for artistic expressions by individuals who might not find another presenter in L.A. Highways offers a malleable, multifaceted, and relatively permanent site for the recurrent time-designated convergence of multicentric communities.

In short, a hetero-locus is a redressive heterotopia, utopian in its intent, activist in its modus operandi, heterogeneous in its contents, and productive in its service to display otherness and to form alternative communities. Highways is an exemplary hetero-locus in L.A.

A Hetero-locus in Transit: Highways Performance Space

For over a decade, Highways Performance Space in Santa Monica has been a crucial center for the development of multicentric performances in L.A. In idealistic terms I call Highways a hetero-locus to recognize its emergence as a redressive agency in this postmodern metropolis named—ironically—the City of Angels.

Highways was founded in 1989 by Linda Frye Burnham (founding editor of High Performance magazine) and Tim Miller (founder of Performance Space 122 in New York) to rectify what they described as “nothing less than the nearannihilation of what was once a thriving presenting infrastructure in Los Angeles.”[12] Their remark conjures up a lost golden age of performance art in L.A.—the decades of the 1970s and 1980s, when artists presented performances in parks, warehouses, loft spaces downtown, storefronts rented for a few nights, platforms at the beach, college studios, artist-run workshops, neighborhood cultural centers, art cafes, dance clubs, and Equity-waiver theaters.[13] Most of these activities subsided toward the end of the 1980s due to the economic recession, the AIDS crisis, and a host of other social problems. Highways opened its doors as an alternative center of cultural production—an antithesis to Hollywood and other mainstream entertainment institutions—precisely to accommodate a large population of local artists who wanted to practice socially conscious political art. Fueled by its cofounders' energy and vision, Highways administered a set of remedial solutions both pointed and urgent. Against the pervasive commercialism, anonymity, transience, alienation, and xenophobic tensions, Highways countered specific antidotes of alternative art, cultural naming, reiterated association, emotional exchange, self-empowerment, and multicultural affirmation of other subjects.
An artist-run, nonprofit organization, Highways is located within the 55,000-square-foot 18th Street Arts Complex, a multifunctional art center cofounded in 1989 by Burnham and the artist Susanna Bixby Dakin. Dakin had purchased the property in the hope of bringing together a group of artists from diverse origins and multiple disciplines to live and work in proximity and collaboration. She envisioned this artistic compound as, in her own words, “a place where no inalienable attribute—skin color, ancestry, culture, sex or sexual orientation—defines or limits one's value.”

Dakin's statement characterized the prevailing themes of tolerance, diversity, dialogue, and community shared by the various art organizations in residence at this progressive cultural enclave, echoing the then-burgeoning rhetoric of multiculturalism.

In less than five years, “multiculturalism” degenerated into a calcified signifier, a porous linguistic vessel that could absorb all meanings, keeping none. It lost its incipient theoretical specificity to join other once-faddish but now suspect terms in L.A.'s cultural inventory. Like yesteryear's fashions, multiculturalism has been pronounced dead by most performance artists (at least among those I interviewed for this book), scrutinized by cultural theorists, and shunned by trend-seeking, fashion-setting, future-oriented journalists. At the start of the 1990s, however, multiculturalism was touted as the most socially viable and grant-worthy ideology in L.A.'s alternative art world. It certainly exerted considerable influence on the ways Highways' two founding artistic codirectors articulated their artistic missions.

To be sure, both Burnham and Miller had already developed distinct political interests, aesthetic visions, and cultural affiliations that went into the formation of Highways. The place's focus on boundary-breaking, issue-oriented, and identity-centered performances reflected Burnham's preference for multidisciplinary experimentation and socially relevant art and Miller's commitment to queer cultural definitions and intercultural collaboration. The two's political stances against the U.S. imperialism abroad and the disguised homophobic bigotry at home agreed with the ethical protocol of multiculturalism. It was reasonable that Burnham and Miller would welcome the discursive impetus of multiculturalism, with which they fused their divergent concerns and molded their representations of Highways.

Burnham and Miller named their organization Highways, for example, because it is located near the intersection of various highways: the east-west oriented Pacific Coast Highway and Interstate 10, which connect divergent cultural communities from the beach to downtown L.A. and beyond, and the south-north oriented 405 and I-5, which link L.A. with Mexico and Canada. Its geographical span found a cultural rationale in Burnham's comment: “Los Angeles has looked to New York and to Europe for its artistic standards and we'd like to add the north-south axis because we're interested in what's going on in Latin America.” Miller, having launched a successful performance art career in New York for a decade, returned to his native L.A. in 1986 because of his dedication to politicized art. As Miller observed, much of the highly visible, multimedia performance in New York sported technical virtuosity and formalist elegance in a cultural vacuum, whereas performance in L.A. existed “in a social context, coming from cultural communities: Asian or Latino or lesbian or gay or whatever.”

“Multiculturalism is a very useful dominant metaphor right now. L.A. is the capital of performance art in North America.”
The overlapped theme in Burnham's and Miller's statements is the *site specificity* of L.A. as the region geographically, politically, economically, and culturally connected with Latin America. The paradigmatic artist in this sitespecific, north-south axis is Guillermo Gómez-Peña. Between 1979, when he enacted *The Loneliness of the Immigrant* in a public elevator, and 1989, when he performed a multilingual monologue/border art piece, *Border Brujo*, at Highways, Gómez-Peña worked with the acclaimed multiethnic ensemble BAW/TAF, became known internationally as one of the most provocative solo performance artists, and published widely on theories of multiculturalism. Among his numerous essays, a 1989 work entitled “The Multicultural Paradigm: An Open Letter to the National Arts Community,” first published in *High Performance*, has been frequently cited as the text that epitomizes the central issues of multiculturalism. Gómez-Peña stated that he wrote the essay “after conversations with over thirty artists and cultural leaders from around the country.”

Although Burnham and Miller did not quote from “The Multicultural Paradigm” in founding Highways, the essay's topical and collaborative nature helps us retrace a once promising but now stigmatized ideological landscape at a specific local moment.

**“The Multicultural Paradigm”**

Part critique, part journalism, part history, and part manifesto, “The Multicultural Paradigm” offers a textual example of Gómez-Peña's border collage. The piece is a conceptual assemblage revolving around the proclamation of a paradigm shift in the last two decades of the twentieth century. The author asserts that the “East Coast/West Coast cultural axis” has now been replaced by a “North/South” one—an assertion shared by Burnham. As the essay argues, this ongoing cultural metamorphosis exposes the “need for U.S. culture to come to terms with the Latino-American ‘cultural other’”—the “Latino Boom” in the 1980s art world is cited as evidence of this need and as the trend leading to the multicultural paradigm. In Gómez-Peña's assessment, the multicultural paradigm brings along such notions as “cultural multiplicity” and “aesthetic relativism,” which have come to challenge the “sacred canons of universality and excellence” manufactured by “hegemonic centers like New York, Paris, and Mexico City.” There is, as a result, “a shift of center, a decentralization of aesthetic canons and styles, and therefore a multiplication of validating criteria.”

While Gómez-Peña regards the multiplication of aesthetic standards as a positive change, he remains ambivalent toward both the Latino Boom and multiculturalism. He describes the Latino Boom as “a media-produced mirage,” dictated by the expansive momentum of consumerism and middle-class Americans’ craving for ethnic exotica. He also satirizes the flimsy, media-and-institution-sanctioned version of multiculturalism. With tongue-in-cheek humor, he invents a slogan for the “conceptual T-shirt” that celebrates multiculturalism: “2 Latinos + 2 Asians + 2 Blacks = Multicultural.” Tokenism is, of course, the theme song of this multicultural slogan, whose subtext suggests that the rest of the large, unmarked space on the T-shirt is reserved for the putatively monocultural/white Euro-American majority.

The sardonic witticism aside, Gómez-Peña's caricature of the institutional interpretation of multiculturalism is incisive and dismally accurate. I find nevertheless an unresolved contradiction in his deeper analysis of multiculturalism. On the one hand, he criticizes multiculturalism as the “hip word of the late 1980s,” a “politically correct” trend that can lead to “a kind of Esperantic Disney World, a tutti-frutti cocktail of cultures, languages, and art forms in which ‘everything becomes everything else,’ and nothing is really indispensable.”
On the other hand, he argues that multiculturalism comes from two decades' concerted effort by “a number of pioneering non-white artists, writers, and institutions,” who approach the term as “a cultural pluralism in which the various ethnic groups collaborate and dialogue with one another without having to sacrifice their particular identities to the Big Blob.”

This contradiction affects another dispute-compliment pairing in “The Multicultural Paradigm.” On the one hand, the author reproaches the United States for engaging in a “national project” that “tends to selectively forget or erase the past”; on the other hand, he hastens to praise that alternative histories have been written by “the so-called disenfranchised groups”: “Latinos, African Americans, Asians, women, gays, experimental artists, and non-aligned intellectuals,” who “have used inventive languages to record the other history from a multicentric perspective.” A question troubles me at this point: Doesn't the fact that these alternative histories can be and have been written testify to the democratic legacy of the U.S. culture, which allows, tolerates, even romanticizes, dissenting opinions? Thus, the Empire that takes is also the Empire that gives, and vice versa.

I suggest that the contradiction characteristic of Gómez-Peña's attitude toward multiculturalism emanates from the contradiction he feels toward the U.S. dominant culture, his hegemonic other. He both identifies the dominant culture as a fake—a “meta-reality” artificially produced by “the mainstream media” and “the monocultural institutions”—and criticizes it as too overpowering—the “Anglo-American” status quo that marginalizes its nonwhite artists and appropriates their ideas for financial gain. Although I agree

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with many of his insights, his argument is disconcerting to me in that it effectively reproduces uninterrogated binarism, pitting the self against the other. Gómez-Peña poses the “experimental,” “syncretic, diverse, and complex” border artists, a progressive cultural constituency to which he belongs, against the hegemonic power, which is deemed necessarily oppressive, conservative, and opportunistic. While he accuses the “Anglo-American” hegemony for perpetrating the monocultural “us” vs. multicultural “them” dichotomy, he also slips into the same exclusive strategy in reverse, raising his own multicultural “us” vs. monocultural “them” dichotomy. Limited by such a polarized—self (oppressed) vs. other (oppressor)—scheme, he is unable to critically examine or acknowledge his own reductive assumptions. As a result, Gómez-Peña deprives himself of the self-reflexive stance crucial to his advocacy of a more multicentric and equitable cultural playing field.

I do not criticize Gómez-Peña's use of dichotomy or reductionism in “The Multicultural Paradigm”; rather, my critique lies in his apparent blindness to this use. To define his subject position, Gómez-Peña has mobilized two conceptual platforms: the strategy of exclusion and the advocacy of his politics. The former strategy implies that exclusion is an unavoidable procedure in identity politics, which he practices by identifying himself as “a deterritorialized Mexican/American artist living in a permanent border experience.” To identify oneself is to make meaning; to make meaning is to exclude. Thus, I submit, exclusiveness is not in itself an oppressive strategy; nor is inclusiveness, for that matter, a tactic with absolute ethical worth. To exclude and to include various others at different moments are both strategies; their implications, by necessity, change with different contexts. Similarly, Gómez-Peña cannot possibly adopt a neutral or all-inclusive position in advocating his politics. In fact, any political position—be it monocultural, multicultural, purist, hybrid, or border—is ideologically invested and self-interested. I believe that one must avow the ideological underpinning as such in articulating one's politics if one hopes to come to terms with the multicentric U.S. cultures. My problem with Gómez-Peña's text is that both conceptual
platforms in his identity politics have become submerged by his eloquence, which leaves no room for self-inquisition.

Gómez-Peña himself generously admits, “Given the vertiginous speed with which contemporary culture metamorphoses, this document carries the risk of soon becoming outdated.” As a “document,” the text offers us a glimpse of the conceptual minefield of multiculturalism before the term loses full credence among those who are supposed to and might indeed benefit from it: those whom I've called other subjects, marginalized either by their inalienable attributes (such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, physical abilities) or by their deliberate choice (for sympathy, perversity, conscience, rebelliousness, or whatever). In this respect, “The Multicultural Paradigm” is valuable for both its insights and problems. The text lays bare the undesirable aspects of multiculturalism as quota, boosterism, and lip service and the constructive aspects of multiculturalism as multicentric cultural definitions, the multiplication of validating criteria, and the composition of alternative histories. The contradictions contained within this text are symptomatic of the approbation, ambivalence, anxiety, and mistrust that other subjects hold toward multiculturalism. To me, “The Multicultural Paradigm,” with its nexus of emotions, conceptual dilemmas, theoretical blind spots, and multiple interpretations, exemplifies the ideological eco-system of Highways at its inception.

**Multicultural Experiments in a Hetero-locus**

Gómez-Peña’s text conveys the complexity and high political stakes involved in the quagmire signified by multiculturalism. It therefore indirectly forecasts the many internal and external difficulties that a radical space like Highways encounters after its initial enthusiasm wears off, including infighting, tribalist contests among groups, competing affiliations within individuals, suspicions of ghettoization, censorship against homoerotic representations, balancing the programming, the wavering of funding or audience supports, and the grieving for comrades lost to AIDS. Topping the list of Highways’ perennial struggles are financial instability and the exhaustion of an idealistic staff after thankless social activism and personal sacrifices.

These difficulties are aggravated by the very importance of Highways as an alternative space in a cultural climate ambivalent toward the agenda it supports. In a collaborative essay “‘Preaching to the Converted,’ ” Tim Miller and David Román maintain that “queer-friendly and supportive presenting institutions provide an invaluable service in the development of an audience for lesbian and gay performance and in the nurturing of emerging and established queer performing artists.” The comment aptly characterizes Highways’ service to the queer communities in L.A. It may also account for the place’s aspiration to serve communities of artists and audiences from multicultural contingencies. A distance nevertheless exists between aspiration and achievement. For some local artists, frustrated high hopes have breed acrimony against Highways, contributing to the space’s dubious reputation.

As I mentioned, autobiographically based solo performance, or self performance, has been a genre long associated with Highways. This genre provides an acute lens for studying Highways’ cultural location in L.A. as a heterolocus, a site where, through an inversion of normative ideology, multifarious signatures of otherness are minted as cultural currencies among performers and spectators. Self performance by an other subject often concerns the artist's
self-representation as a subaltern individual who has been turned into an “other”—named as “multicultural,” “ethnic,” “feminist,” “queer,” “poor,” “old,” or “foreign”—by her/his acculturation in this country. The genre therefore most closely demonstrates the products manufactured and displayed in a hetero-locus: heterogeneity, multicentricity, and the longing for an affective locus embodied by the sense of home and the presence of community.

Self performance came into prominence in L.A. during the late 1980s, a period diagnosed by Gómez-Peña as suffering from a “multicultural fever of epidemic proportions.”[^29] The force of multiculturalism persuaded many hitherto underrepresented artists to stake their claims to self-naming and cultural visibility. Other regional factors (including, especially, the local heritage of feminist performance; the influx of theater-or media-trained actors; the AIDS, homeless, and drug crises; the growing awareness of a diverse, multiethnic and multinational social body) also motivated individual artists to define, fabricate, assemble, and enact their subject positions by telling their personal/political stories. These multicentric self performances are compelling testimonies to my thesis of a feminist-multicultural continuum in L.A. performance.

In an impassioned essay entitled “Performing All Our Lives: AIDS, Performance, Community,” David Román observes that the “revitalization of performance by political artists outside of dominant culture indicates the emerging recognition of performance as a political tool, effective for its immediacy, stripped-down cost effectiveness and transportability.”[^30] The essay explicates the contributions of Tim Miller's art/activism to a community devastated by the AIDS pandemic. Román's targeted model is, by implication, self performance, which is an efficacious medium for social activism and relatively cost-effective to produce. The genre's flexibility affords many artists a financial incentive, allowing them touring engagements that bring major incomes in an era when public funding for the arts is both precarious and restrictive.

Multicentric self performances, as discussed in Chapter 1, have refashioned the 1970s model of redressive performance into a political vehicle for identity reconstruction, cultural intervention, social activism, and community formation.[^31] Many practitioners who follow this redressive agenda stage their works in neighborhood community centers, college campuses, public plazas, and other Foucauldian heterotopias (prisons, hospitals, orphanages). The existence of Highways, however, offers a site-designated locus for enacting politicized self performances. In addition to being a presenter of self performance, Highways has in effect reproduced the genre through its artist-run workshops. Miller frequently acknowledges Rachel Rosenthal's influence on local performance artists through her DbD workshops in West L.A. He has played a

similar role at Highways. A generation of self performance artists (as well as nonartists who might not perform in public) has been trained by Miller, who urges his workshop participants to retrieve “banished knowledges” from within their bodies and memories. Miller's method features direct address; storytelling via a mélange of images, texts, music, and movements; and the fearless excavation of one's individual and cultural identities. Over the years this mode has amounted to a Highways style of self performance.

“If you build it, they will come,” the optimistic motto popularized by the movie *The Field of Dreams*, elucidates the mutually reinforcing relationship between Highways and local artists who have shared the space's community-centered interest, especially during the early years.
when multiculturalism was an L.A.-gripping grand experiment. A self-propagating hetero-
locus, Highways exhibits, and occasionally commissions, self performances that probe the
manifold articulations of otherness in subaltern subjectivity, economic or political
marginality, and queer (gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered) sexuality. Some artists who
primarily work with ensembles or in other media have also—out of their own initiatives—
developed self performance projects for Highways. Self performance has thus risen as an
aesthetic dialect spoken at and transmitted by Highways; the artists' own irreducible
differences translate into the variety of subject matter, thematic accents, and presentational
styles in performance. As these artists address and/or belong to divergent cultural
constituencies, their appearances at Highways attract spectators from multiple sectors in L.A.
—a phenomenon aided by the venue's struggle to maintain a lower-than-average ticket price.
The result is the continuous and vacillating emergence of Highways as a geocultural center
where multiple (subaltern) communities coalesce, confirm and reinvent themselves, and
overlap with others. Self performance artists serve as different anchors for these occasions.

Artists, Critics, and Spectators in a Hetero-locus

My naming of the genre in question as “self performance” is, to some extent, controversial.
The artist Joan Hotchkis objects to the term because, to her, the word “self” connotes
individualism, narcissism, egoism—ideas antithetical to the sociopolitical intention of this
work. Worse, Hotchkis adds, the term conjures up the popular pursuit of psychoanalytical
therapy in this country. Detractors have used the very reference to stigmatize self performance
artists as perennial complainers, even self-indulgent hypochondriacs, who arrest an innocent
audience for their own problems. “Is it art, or is it therapy?” the critics question. “Is it art, or is
it social work?” goes another version. But I wonder: Why must there be such a division? Why
can't a work be both art and therapy, performance and healing, social activism and public/private
exorcism? After all, performance art was born out of the desire to transgress and merge
boundaries: the “blurring of art and life,” in the words of Allan Kaprow.

Since self performance openly tenders fragments of an artist's re-dreamed life, the enactment
of a piece is literally a double passage of being: a living and reliving through a time/space
from which the stuff of self is extracted—fished, as it were, from an opaque swamp. And if
self performance not only resembles but enacts life, then this comment by Gilles Deleuze on
writing may also apply to performance:

Writing is a question of becoming, always incomplete, always in the midst of being formed,
and goes beyond the matter of any livable or lived experience. It is a process, that is, a
passage of Life that traverses both the livable and the lived. Writing is inseparable from
becoming: in writing, one becomes-woman, becomes-animal or vegetable, becomes-molecule
to the point of becoming imperceptible.

The live body on stage performing is not merely the specimen of an individual life; s/he is
also the surrogate for myriad other lives, both present and absent from the performance site.
The singular life displayed is then an instance of and a canvas for what Deleuze calls Life. In
self performance, one becomes one's self-representations, becomes one's significant or
malignant others, becomes one's critics, fans, clinicians, patients. One becomes one's nostalgic
home/site, schizophrenic motherland, and present utopia. One becomes one's dead memories
in a grave or instant salvation at a checkout counter. One becomes one's immediate and projected communities.

“Performance artist, heal thyself,” calls Miller, reflecting:

By sifting through my own sense of deep need, as it speaks to my observations and participation in a community, I identify a hot-spot. I explore the feelings surrounding this theme. I propose some plans of action that address my own needs and might possibly be of use to others in my community. I desire to convert our private and communal fears into a courage to connect with each other, to convert the anxieties we face in these troubled times into a deep commitment to face the challenges in our daily lives.\(^{[35]}\)

I call a therapy useful if an individual self is repaired. I call a performance inspiring if a damaged body is metaphorically dissected, its wounds exposed, medicated, or sutured, while an ambition for health or at least enlightened sickness is communicated. My validation of self performance as a potential healing and community-building tool is not to deny critical encounter with this work. I merely urge us not to condemn self performance for its working premises and politics but to evaluate the work according to its projected criteria.

Liberal cultural critics, impelled by what Cornel West calls “the new cultural politics of difference,” tend to refrain from rebuking the sociocultural underclass. West cautions, however, that such hesitation ends up denying individuals from those classes “the freedom to err.”\(^{[36]}\) As a critic who is an other subject sympathetic toward the cultural politics of difference, I have to alert myself not to become ideologically blind to the limitations and grandiose claims that have affected some self performances. I attempt to exercise what Román describes as “amode of criticism that is neither adversarial nor polemical.” Román candidly points out that a critic's work “is never objective; moreover, it affects the very artists under consideration—psychically, materially, spiritually. And yet despite the claim, critical generosity is never about conceding to the artist's intentions or authority.”\(^{[37]}\) I believe that both the critical process and self performance aspire to a similar function: to stimulate cultural debates about the dominant social mores that have become so ingrained in our daily lives that we no longer perceive their artificiality and their power to debilitate our best judgment and fair conscience. In this respect, my critical project joins Román's cultural practice, which responds to the challenge set forth by Jill Dolan in Feminist Spectator as Critic: to “institute a dialogue that resonates beyond the confines of an insular community.”\(^{[38]}\)

The desire for radical sociocultural change fuels most self performances. To ensure the possibility of a dialogic process, the genre's practitioners typically assume an equal footing with their multiple audiences, for no fair exchange is possible without the participants' awareness of their own positions in a specific context. Thus, unlike the involuntary audience who chanced upon Gómez-Peña's Loneliness in an elevator, the spectators who come to a heterolocus such as Highways are seldom innocent. They might not leave the space satisfied, convinced, or converted, but they have come to the hetero-locus anticipating a live solo performance, a theater of enacted and displayed self. Most likely this random assemblage of self-selected spectators functions as witnesses at the performance site. Being witnesses, to quote Diana Taylor's eloquent analysis in “Border Watching,” these spectators consent to participate in “a different scopic economy than peeping or watching. Gone is the comfort of perspectival vision—the safe vantage point from which the visual field is opened up and organized before the seeing ‘I’ that leaves the viewer out of the frame.”\(^{[39]}\)
The witnessing others who are directly addressed by a self performance artist lose their freedom to be undisturbed. “The border has suddenly moved,” Taylor continues, “it’s no longer a question of the outer looking at the inner—we [the spectators] inhabit the expanded border zone of the ‘inner.’” There is

no stable footing here—the viewing subject is also the object of the gaze; the outsider is incorporated into the play of looks. We are all looking, looking at each other looking. No two lookers are the same. In other words, I am not asserting that all spectators for a self performance belong to a homogenized camp called “witnesses.” Nor do I aver that voyeurs, undercover agents, or spies from “TWERPS” (The White Elite Right Patriarchal System, an acronym humorously coined by Denise Uyehara) are never present in a hetero-locus. But I do want to distinguish between an involuntary and a voluntary audience. The involuntary audience might be projected candidates for a conceptual/body act such as Loneliness. In emphatic contrast, the voluntary audience that, for whatever reason, attends a self performance at a specified site affords the artist and fellow viewers the possibility of receiving a gift of theater: that of dialogue and communion.

Knowing the schizophrenic U.S. context that at once practices and disdains individualism, longs for and mocks self-healing, I deliberately use “self performance” in lieu of “autobiographically based solo performance” to open up the conceptual implications of “self.” Whether they agree with my terminology or not, the selected artists’ works challenge the monolithic understanding of “self” as a transcendent, egotistical individual, free-floating in a degravitated, others-proof solitude. I admit that whining self-indulgence may well flavor some self performances, but the self represented in my selections is much more troubled, expansive, multiple, and radically intertwined with others. For the task of naming oneself is ever complicated within a hetero-locus, a queer space, a deviant site, a subaltern-commune-in-transit.

Self performance proffers a sheltered arena for a subjugated individual to publicly name, disclose, and legitimize her/his selfhood and otherness—the secret collage of strangeness that affects us all. The complication of self-naming becomes doubly so within a hetero-locus because the artist, as an estranged or othered individual, has never been granted unearned access to a transcendent, competent, and unproblematic selfhood. The pursuit of identity definition, especially for one whose subjectivity is presumed to be suspect, impure, or queer, must at least be doubled. It requires simultaneously the deconstruction of her/his internalized oppression and distorted self-images as well as the reconstruction of an emergent, provisional, and temporarily cohered (if not fully coherent) drama of self-identity. Self performance signifies the demonstrated series of the artist’s deconstructed/reconstructed self—or rather selves—retrieved or reimagined from her/his episodic auto-narratives. The deconstructive procedure often involves the dismantling, evocation, or parody of cultural stereotypes that confine the artist/self. The reconstructive procedure entails the compositions of auto-mythologies, the mythic retrieval and acquisition of one’s singular identity (e.g., as a woman; a Latino; a panhandler; a Jew) and/or multiple identities (e.g., as an Asian American woman; a Latino gay rights activist; a black middle-class lesbian; a Vietnam-veteran panhandler; a Jewish, HIV-positive painter).
With both the deconstructive and reconstructive procedures, the artist cannot but be the *perceptual center* who gleans, assembles, and sifts from diverse sources—memories, diaries, family albums, ancestral lore, cultural fictions, outright fabrications—the heterogeneous fragments of a *self-in-progress*, a contingent, ephemeral, but fervently enacted body/subject, a corporeal entity that Chela Sandoval names as “tactical subjectivity” and Norma Alarcón proposes as “a subject-in-process.” Whatever terminology we choose, I submit that the subjectivity portrayed and enacted by a self performer is both *decentered* (as traces that scatter all over the piece) and *recentered* (as auto-inscriptions acted out here-and-now in a communal/theatrical site). This perceptual center embodied by the artist recalls my concept of decentered centrality laid out in Chapter 1 and points to the dominant concept-metaphor developed here: the hetero-locus.

Up to this point I've used “hetero-locus” to explain the cultural and geosocial locations of Highways as a site where signs of otherness are sanctioned, shared, and exchanged among artists and spectators. “Hetero-locus” is also an apt metaphor for a self performance by an other subject: “hetero” signals the decentered/recentered contents of the performance; “locus” conveys the perceptual center—the artist—who offers these contents to those who congregate at the designated site. Insofar as the performance site itself bears no relation to the spectators before an event starts, the artist who draws the individuals together is the body actively creating the “locus” where a miscellaneous group will inhabit for a certain duration. A compound triple-effect then takes place when a self performance happens within a hetero-locus like Highways. The artist, who is the *perceptual locus* bringing forth an auto-narrative, creates the *occasional locus* —the self performance itself—which gathers an audience within the *geocultural locus*, Highways. This sequence contains two key concepts: the artist-agent who creates a communal occasion for individuals to witness a self-presenting action and the multiple loci—the perceptual, occasional, geocultural sites—activated by such artistic agency.

The artistic agent becomes linked with the multiple hetero-loci through a crucial element: *time*, which virtually engenders, assembles, and dissipates all inhabitants inside a performance site. At a certain hour (say, by 8:30 p.m., the regular show time), two predominant types of spectators arrive at Highways: one is what we might call Highways' in-house audience community, composed of regular patrons; the other comes from the multiple cultural communities to which the artist belongs. The artist, together with the spectators who might experience various degrees of complicity, constitutes the affective locus within which an episodic succession of heterogeneous sights and sounds appear, even as they simultaneously disappear. Every component in this scenario is temporary: the live action, the affective locus inhabited by a heterogeneous congregation, and the perceptions of dialogic exchange and communion are all gauged, manipulated, and adjourned by time.

Based as it is on a joint currency of collaboratively consumed time, self performance, unlike a conceptual performance, draws its energy from an immediate—not a virtual—audience. It takes advantage of live theater's potential efficacy to cohere and define a “spectatorial community.” As a form of theater that attracts intersecting cultural interests, self performance can overcome the geographic dispersion and cultural segregation of an urban locale that prides itself on a perpetual and rapid circulation of time. “Time is money!” goes a Hollywood truism. In the industrial standard “movie speed,” every “art consideration” has to happen and be executed yesterday, for it to be sold tomorrow—today seems to be eclipsed by too much trafficking smog. A commercial theater activity, with a high price tag, might still
fit into this economy as a quaint cousin from a bygone village. A noncommercial, anticorporate, and community-oriented theater work, such as a self performance at Highways, is an anomaly. The value of this anomaly lies precisely in its idealistic reversal of the late-capitalist zeitgeist of L.A. *Today* is the spring wind of May, the utopian seal in Shakespeare's love sonnets, that breezes through the affective locus of a self performance.

My insistence on the primacy of time in a self performance has a larger theoretical implication. As the genre practices identity politics, I emphasize its temporary modality to tackle the suspicion that practitioners of identity politics necessarily constrain themselves and homogenize their affiliated cultural communities. I find it hardly possible for any live enactment—be it self performance or not—to fix the meanings of the materials conveyed. Neither the artist's “identity” nor her/his “politics” can be adequately “essentialized” by a self performance.

As Amelia Jones argues in a context related to solo body art, the artist's self/identity embodied in a performance is never “completely legible or fixed in its effects”; rather, the artist's self-re/presentation, “through its very performativity and its unveiling of the body of the artist, surfaces the insufficiency and incoherence of the body/self (or the body-as-subject) and its inability to deliver itself fully (whether to the subject-in-performance herself or himself or to the one who engages with this body).”[45] In other words, even when self performance artists continually expose the multiple layers that constitute their identities, they can never guarantee that the meanings of their enacted selves will be fully intelligible to themselves or to their mixed spectators. Self performance provides a temporary sanctuary for artists to reiterate explicitly the

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different markings that particularize their bodies. Yet the fact that they cling to such performative reiterations implies that their self-interpretations can never be fully fixed and authenticated.[46] In the same light, the political causes they advocate in performance are no more than *propositions*, even though the communal occasions—the affective loci—enabled by their self performances are themselves *activist events*. Such a distinction arises from the difference between an act of communication (in this case, theater) and the result of this act (the projected sociocultural change). While an earnest communication is endeavored and may indeed be appreciated by the receivers, the result of this communication is never assured.

This uncertainty of communication—even when explicit meanings have been uttered—is exacerbated by the peculiar condition of theater, for every assertion made in a performance site only begins and always ends with the actual performance. Time, a dramatic persona favored by Shakespeare, is ever present to turn all images and words into unverifiable memories—our march toward mortality, alas, never ceases. Given this theatrical logic, or reality principle, nothing performed or lived can be held to the test of permanency. Just as the affective locus for a self performance technically does not exist prior to the scheduled show time, so the artist's “self” exists at best as an amorphous unknown before a self performance starts. There is no predetermined self-identity worn by the artist like a set costume. On the contrary, the artist's performative action itself constitutes, displays, and disseminates the impressions of a self through time. Thus, self performance presents nothing but shards of an individual life temporarily illuminated for the occasional gathering of witnessing others.

At this point, another distinction must be made between the artist's display of self/identities as a performance and the artist's own continuous engagement with her/his self/identities in life. My commentary pertains to the former situation, which is, moreover, viewed from a
critic/spectator's perspective. I imagine that from the vantage point of the artist, who is after all the protagonist in her/his continuous autobiography (till death do they part), the unfolding of a self performance does not stop with the end of a show. It merely suspends itself in mid-breath, hibernating amid the memory of others' applause, in anticipation of the next unfolding.

Multicentric Self Performances at Highways

This section samples a collection of self performance pieces by seven artists: Tim Miller, Luis Alfaro, Joan Hotchkis, Danielle Brazell, Dan Kwong, Denise Uyehara, and Shishir Kurup. My sampling reflects the diversity commonly advocated by the multicultural agenda. The seven artists represent a mix of gender, race, class, sexuality, age, and nationality. They were trained in various disciplines: dance, theater, music, visual arts, literature. Some are more established than others: Miller started practicing performance art in the late 1970s, Kwong and Alfaro in the late 1980s; Hotchkis has had a successful career in mainstream theater and television and has coauthored a college textbook on acting; Kurup has worked as an actor, writer, composer, and director for theater since the mid-1980s. All these artists work in multiple capacities: besides being solo performers, cultural provocateurs, performance teachers, and community organizers, some also serve as AIDS activists with ACT UP/L.A. (Miller and Alfaro), as curators (Kwong has curated and produced an annual Asian American performance festival, “Treasure in the House,” at Highways since 1991), as film writers, actors, and producers (Hotchkis starred in her one-woman film Legacy and Alfaro in his Chicanismo); as artistic directors (Miller as the founding and Brazell as the current artistic director of Highways); and as ensemble players (Alfaro has worked with Dark Horses, Tayer, Queer Rites, and Mama's Boys and runs the Latino Theatre Initiative at the Mark Taper Forum; Kwong often tours with the Asian American collective The Great Leap; Kurup was the director of the Asian American Theatre Project and now works primarily with the Cornerstone Theatre Company; both Brazell and Uyehara belong to Sacred Naked Nature Girls, a feminist ensemble discussed in Chapter 6).

In most cases, the artists themselves chose the pieces discussed as representative self performance projects and offered me videotapes of the work. These pieces were not necessarily the first work they had presented at Highways and two selections, Kwong's Monkhood in Three Easy Lessons (1993) and Uyehara's Headless Turtleneck Relatives (1992/93), debuted elsewhere and were remounted at Highways. The mutability of this genre complicates the research. The artists often continue to develop their projects during subsequent touring engagements, modifying the work for different audiences and sites. Such mutability befits a genre that builds around the artist's selfhood/subjectivity, embodied by a performative medley of her/his personality, autobiography, memories, and reveries. As the artists are alive and changing, so their self performances keep evolving.

The genre's mutability also indicates howeconomics dictates the form. Self performance became an especially popular genre for touring—from which artists earn their major incomes—at the turn of the 1990s, when multiculturalism emerged as an intellectual commodity for many regions in the United States. The grueling touring schedule and the range of programming formats demand that self performance adapt to a flexible dramaturgical feature: the modular structure, with the whole piece organized into independent modules or episodes. Each episode may then be detached from the whole to be
performed alone; all the episodes may be rearranged in a different order; some episodes may be recycled and combined with others to form a new piece. Often the title is the sole identifiable label for a project; the rest mutates radically or exists in different versions. Sometimes the title itself is changed after a show, even though the action essentially follows its original script. Although such adaptability evolves from the genre's dependence on transportability for economic survival, it creates two opposite predicaments. For the researcher, the predicament comes from the genre's lack of fixity; for the spectators, from its predictability.

As a researcher, I have resolved the genre's at times enticing, at times frustrating, instability by commenting on the most complete version of a piece, which might not be the original (and undocumented) version shown at Highways. My justification is that the selections, by virtue of their intersections with Highways, are products exhibited and/or manufactured at this heterolocus, even though, as live artworks, they are bound to change. I cannot but capture temporary incarnations of these mutable products. As a spectator, I find that the ease with which some episodes can be and have been recycled among different pieces betrays a limit of this genre. For one who steadily follows an artist's work, some of the self performance materials may become too familiar and repetitive. Incidentally, I believe that such thematic and rhetorical predictability may also account for the rapid discursive entropy of multiculturalism, which is, after all, an ideological backdrop for the self performance genre. Yet, as Dan Kwong commented after extensive touring, multiculturalism may be dead in L.A., but it is still a novelty in many other regions both here and abroad. As I remember my own initial astonishment, for someone new to a self performance work, the encounter may be likened to the shock of seeing/hearing one's own likeness mirrored by an other or of mis/recognizing a totally different other for the first time.

The seven pieces here together enact a multicentric landscape. Each selection is authored and performed by a solo artist, but the majority involve a production team (for direction, dramaturgy, design, music, or choreography), like most theater works. Taken respectively, most pieces evince a centric rather than multicentric ethos. I read those centric visions as the artists' interpretations of what constitutes their self/subjectivity. For self performance proffers the artist a malleable site, a hetero-locus just a split second before its emergence/coming out, to be made into an alternative cosmos according to her/his own image.

[Segment 2]

[Segment 2]

MY QUEER BODY BY TIM MILLER

If there is a sole conceptual center in Miller's My Queer Body (1992), it is the analogy between his own queerified gay male body and the body politic of an envisioned queer nation. The artist announces the advent of his queer body/nation by producing a “state” iconography prior to the performance. The poster features Miller standing in front of a white wall, decorated by a pair of evenly parted curtains that frame his body in the center (fig. 24). Naked except for four regional signs marking his “head,” “heart,” “belly,” and “dick,” Miller's body twists from one side to the other, with his right arm lifting up to partially encircle his head; his forearm and palm are turned outward, as if to shelter the dais of his consciousness. Stretching down from his slanted left shoulder is the arc of his other arm,
which leads to a soft fist with an index finger pointing to the *capital* of this body/nation: his penis, strategically concealed by its verbal double—the “dick” sign. Miller's eyes look straight into mine, simultaneously inviting and resisting the invasion of my gaze. An exchange of spectatorial desires is tacitly documented by Miller's direct gaze, provoking a sensation described by Rebecca Schneider as “complicit, satiable reciprocity between viewer and viewed.” Such unveiling of voyeuristic reciprocity registers Miller's largely exposed figure as confident, and if queer. The iconography further exaggerates Miller's confident queerness by the tension between his central position, the biological symmetry of his human physique, and his inexorably asymmetrical body posturing.

I experience a twofold effect from this queer iconography. As a confrontational inscription, Miller's body evokes the hegemonic standard for the white male body reified in Western cultures, only to flaunt his own deviation from it. As a phantasmic genesis, however, Miller's body signifies the symbolic standard of his queer-centric nation. I might dub this queer iconography a *hetero-corpus*, a corporeal site that recognizes and takes pride in its own otherness/deviance/queerness.

The performance of *My Queer Body* pursues the carnal economy that animates Miller's iconic figure in the poster. Miller enters through the audience to a stage occupied only by a bowl of water (thirst, sweat, or tears?), a piece of lava (rage like fire?), and an object wrapped in a red cloth (mourning in blood?). He initiates a conversation with the audience, calling his own entrance action “a psychosexual scavenger hunt,” which enables him to “gather” some desirable supplies from his immediate others. Grabbing an unsuspecting spectator's fingers, he solicits the people now sitting in his home/site to call out their favorite body parts: finger, foot, brain, heart, thigh, breast, lip, dick, pussy, butthole. Having assembled these nominal prostheses, the artist declares, “We have summoned the body! The body is here.” Miller's bodysummoning, audience-melding, and locus-forming ritual leads to a humorous narrative about his fantastic procreation as a “queer little spermlet,” dodging the homophobic “macho slimebag straight-pig” sperms, and swimming valiantly to impregnate “a willing dyke ovum.” “ecce homo!!” After
a splendid “explosion of creative electricity” and a “shifting of queer tectonic plates,” a queer superstar infant is born—“Behold the fag.” “And the big cry to the universe”: “We're-Here-We're-Queer-Get-Used-To-It.”[50]

This ample-lunged, loud-mouth fag is destined to be a diplomat from his queerdom. Standing resolutely at the crossroads where the spectators' vanishing points intersect, Miller's body is singular, yet also caught in the process of becoming more than an individual property. Deleuze has articulated this state of “becoming”:

To become is not to attain a form (identification, imitation, Mimesis) but to find the zone of proximity, indiscernibility, or indifferetiation where one can no longer be distinguished from a woman, an animal, or a molecule—neither imprecise nor general, but unforeseen and nonexistant, singularized out of a population rather than determined in a form…. Becoming is always “between” or “among”: a woman between women, or an animal among others.[51]

A theatrical stage is par excellence the Deleuzian zone of proximity, indeterminacy, and transformation, in which a performer is always becoming a persona that is partially self, partially other. In his inaugural theatrical ritual Miller presents himself as a medium between a queer body/nation and an unqueer one somewhere out there; he stands as a queer witness among other queer-curious or queer-sympathetic witnesses. Reinforced by his entrance ritual and genesis myth, Miller's singular, emblematic body becomes the collective, composite
body, the affective locus/corpus that encompasses both himself and others. Those live and present other bodies inhabiting the theater are implicated within the affective locus, while those others who are dead or absent from Miller's theatrical home/site are incorporated by his remembrance. I see this opening sequence as Miller's queering of the theatrical space that both accommodates and becomes his self performance. A sexualized, queer body enters a hetero-locus and, by the sheer energy of its/his surrogacy, it/he pushes the spectators toward the process of becoming queer.

In the age of AIDS, becoming queer conjures up the threats of death that might accompany unsafe sex and the pain of mourning for those beloved who have become mere statistics under this plague. The harrowing historical context renders Miller's queer-centric stance an activist and repressive act with high political stakes. As Román argues, Miller's recuperation of “the sexual without apology” not only radically departs from “the assimilationist positions represented in gay theatre” in the early 1990s but boldly counteracts the dominant discourse that inscribes a gay male body as always already diseased.[52] Miller most palpably enunciates his queer-centric and sex-positive stance in an episode that has caused severe consternation among his right-wing attackers and NEA censors: a memorial sequence culminating in a dialogue with his penis.[53] In blazing red light, Miller strips himself naked and touches different areas of his skin, remembering the blood pouring out of the wounds borne by his own, his lovers', and friends’ queer bodies. His requiem charts the wreckage wreaked by the homophobic terrorism. Yet, despite the fear, the shame, and the grief, he vows to reclaim his sexuality from the violence that clams to unmake his queer body. The choice vehicle for this sexual redemption, as forecast by his poster, is the penis, the power capital for his queer body/nation. Miller reasons with his flaccid penis, “Get hard because it still feels good to be touched… get hard because there is so much that is gone… get hard because I am queer and it is good and I am good and I don't just mean in bed…. This is my body! And these are all our times. So… Get hard … Get hard … Get hard.”[54]

I remember being touched by the “Get hard” monologue during a performance at the Yale Repertory Theatre. I also remember feeling a sense of estrangement for being excluded, because the penis is certainly not the power capital in my queerdom. I might have partially become a sentient organ in Miller's affective locus/corpus during the performance, but, as the state of becoming never ensures total transubstantiation, I was also forced to face the legendary “lack” that the patriarchal hegemony, since Freud, has assigned to my female physique. Although I endorse Miller's queer-centric attitude as an emergency measure against the encroachment of a hostile world, my own dilemma prompts me to consider his investment in the penis as the symbol of queer agency a miscalculation.

As Peggy Phelan maintains, Miller's appellation of “queer” in My Queer Body “signals a desire to re-map bodies—across gender, race, class, age, sickness and health, across different desires and sexualities, and different arrangements of bodies and lives.” This well-intentioned, all-inclusive queer politics exists, nevertheless, in contradistinction to the climactic strategy with which Miller attains queer empowerment: through his penis. Insofar as the penis is a specifically male genital, to cast it as the Way to sexual redemption disregards the primacy of sexual difference in some other queer bodies' lives. Phelan points out that Miller's use of his penis in this performance becomes indistinguishable from that of the phallus in Lacan's usage: as the transcendental signifier for authority, judgment, and power. “Since this white phallus has played such a pivotal role in the violent, racist, and misogynistic history of ‘his’
possession of other bodies, it is probably not the best idea to place such emphasis on the white male penis when seeking to foster identification with ‘queer history’ or ‘queer bodies.’”

To extend Phelan's comment in my idiom: while a queer-centric affirmation may be a viable method in building political coalition among subaltern subjects, the penis/phallus itself is not a queer-specific symbol. Rather than inverting the normative ideology, Miller's privileging of his penis/phallus ironically confirms the hegemonic, patriarchal order. Thus, his invocation of the penis in *My Queer Body* has unwittingly pushed the theatrical action toward another direction: becoming male and unqueer.

Given the problematic status of the penis/phallus as a vehicle for queer empowerment, would Miller's self performance be more appealing had he entitled it *My Gay Body*? I think not. Better to err at being magnanimous in one's eagerness to include others than to be defensible in every cautious detail for being politically correct. In its fervent desire to melt the distance between self and others, *My Queer Body* becomes indeed queer.

**DOWNTOWN BY LUIS ALFARO**

In press interviews about his work, Alfaro stresses that his art cannot be separated from his community. “The Chicano community is familia,” Alfaro states. “There's this very protective thing around it: You can't see it, but it's there. When you break the mold—by being gay and brown and Catholic—it makes people uneasy.” Community and family; sexuality, ethnicity, and religion; protectiveness and transgression—the topics called to attention by Alfaro's brief remark provide the materials for *Downtown* (1990), his self performance piece created with frequent collaborator Tom Dennison. Each topic represents an emotional bond and ethical imperative for Alfaro; together, however, they cause predicaments in his existence because they are entangled, yet contradictory, with one another.

Being gay and Chicano and an artist means that Alfaro cannot assert his selfhood without being ostracized from the cultural site he momentarily occupies. He transgresses against “the mold” but still clings to the mold for acceptance, relevance, love, and cultural belonging— therein lies his distress. “I am a Queer Chicano. A native in no land,” declares Alfaro in an episode from *Downtown* called “Orphan of Aztlán,” which describes his dilemma of feeling like an illegal immigrant in every home/site he resides in. He experiences homophobia within the Chicano and Mexican communities—his familia based on blood; he suffers from racism among gay white males—his familia based on sexual affinities; he is deemed an anathema by the Catholic Church, which supplies the redemptive blood and spirit food for his familias. Alfaro's self performance embodies his quest for “the intersection of possibility,” in which he may negotiate among those coexisting cultural sites in his selfhood. It is a quest that requires constant motion: he must travel incessantly among the differential and competing claims from his intersecting communities. The common ground on which Alfaro makes these constant travels is, as implied by his piece's title, downtown L.A. His turbulent home turf is locatable on the *Thomas Guide* as the Pico-Union district, a densely populated and impoverished Latino/a neighborhood. Wherever he travels, Alfaro brings this urban landscape, a geosocial and psychocultural hetero-locus, with him.

*Downtown* opens with drive-by film shots of downtown L.A. streets projected onto a scrim, with soundtrack from Petula Clark's pop song “Downtown.” In rude contrast to Clark's
lighthearted “you can forget all your troubles, forget all your cares,” the sound of a police
helicopter circling overhead invades the song. Alfaro leaves his seat in the audience and walks
up to join the pedestrians in the projection. He then detaches himself from the blackand-white
urban panorama for his opening monologue, “On a Street Corner,” which delivers a rapid
series of narrative snapshots about the neighborhood people and events that he has witnessed
—“Because desire is memory and I crave it like one of the born-agains in my mama's
church,” he chants.

Alfaro moves between a mediated imago of his hometown on the scrim and the immediate
theatrical space where he evokes the rich and convoluted textures flattened out by the imago.
The movement characterizes his roles in Downtown: an observer who is both inside and
outside the scene; an affectionate snitcher who leaks information about his community under
the glamorous Hollywood sign and the relentless watch of the L.A.P.D. cops. He is a migrant
neighborhood bard who chronicles the daily dealings of homeboys, druggies, alcoholics,
thieves, streetwalkers, tamale peddlers, queens and fairies, housewives and sweatshop
laborers, domineering abuelitas, drifting chulos, and ailing tías. Alfaro maintains this cruising
motion throughout his multicharacter montage about downtown L.A. He travels from voice to
voice, from ritualistic gesture to flamboyant attitude, from a homeboy headband to a helmet
and roller skaters, from a black slip that half conceals his hairy chest to a black T-shirt with
the ACT UP logos “Silence = Death.” His tale is a mosaic epic about an urban locale
perceived by a queer Chicano poet, lunging out from a street corner, from a Roller Derby
childhood, from an empty lot next door where a cat-size rat is broomed to death, or from a
Latino gay bar named Circus Disco.

“The blood is thicker than water, family is greater than friends, and the Virgin Mary watches
over all of us.” This mantra first appears in an episode in which Alfaro recalls a Virgin
Mary doll that his dad got on a drunken trip to Tijuana. The plastic icon is a sacred souvenir
that, when plugged into an outlet, rotates and blesses all sides of the household. The mantra
becomes the central metaphor for Alfaro's inquiries into love, loss, kinship, emotional and
cultural affiliations, as he takes poetic flight through those intimate moments with others that
inscribe a novel of the self.

The rotating Virgin Mary doll led the artist to his first taste of erotic love, when he fell for a
guy who had the same icon hanging from the neck and

who talked like an actor in a TV series. As the affair ended, his relatives evoked the mantra to
soothe him—blood is thicker than water! But blood also travels and its metaphorical/semantic
import shifts with different contexts. Blood has acquired an especially alarming significance
with the AIDS crisis. Raising an index finger, Alfaro describes a childhood incident in which
he cut his finger while jumping into a rosebush. His abuelita simply put his bleeding finger
into her mouth, applying her “primitive Latino first aid” to save his afflicted digit. In a recent
accident at work, he cut his finger again while making an AIDS information pamphlet. The
blood dripped down from the finger, but none of his gay Latino colleagues dared to touch it—
they “would prefer to see it bleed and gush than to question mortality and fate.” In this
episode it seems, again, that blood is thicker than water. Another episode, however, turns the
mantra into an indignant question. When he went to a memorial service for his friend Julio, a
queer Latino-Filipino who recently died of AIDS, Julio's mother got on stage and “told a
room full of queers that his family did not support his lifestyle.” Still enraged by this
condemning eulogy, Alfaro drove down Sunset Boulevard and saw on top of the Playboy
building a mural with a little boy playing with a handgun. The mural read “Save the Children,
Stop the Violence.” Alfaro imagined it was Julio's picture on the billboard next to the message: “Save the Children, Kill Your Parents.”

If geography is destiny in L.A., Downtown literalizes the local maxim as a resident's daily itinerary of being. To follow this itinerary, according to Alfaro's self documentation, is to “Blur the line / take the journey / play with the unknown / deal with the whole enchilada / Race / Class / Sex / Gender / Privilege.”

TEARSHEETS BY JOAN HOTCHKIS

“White” is the color, the race, the ethnicity, the class, the history, and the privilege interrogated by Hotchkis's self performance Tearsheets (1990), initially subtitled Letters I Didn't Send Home, but later changed to Rude Tales from the Ranch. The ranch here refers to the 26,000-acre Rancho Los Alamitos in Long Beach, which was once owned by Hotchkis's mother's family, the ultrawealthy Bixby clan. It is now partially a historic site and partially the campus of California State University at Long Beach. In her childhood during the 1930s, Hotchkis used to visit the ranch almost every weekend and enjoyed it as her “spiritual home.” Despite the love, pride, and identification that the ranch inspired in her, Hotchkis now recalls her spiritual home with ambivalence, as she discloses in her comment on the motivation for creating Tearsheets: “As a fourth-generation Californian from a cattle ranch family, I thought that the children were raised like cattle, roped, corralled, and branded…. This piece is about people's bodies and how the cowboy culture has shaped us and mis-shaped us.”

At the premiere of Tearsheets at Highways, Douglas D. Smith's design transforms the theatrical locus into an abode of whiteness, the symbol that Hotchkis selects to embody the values inherited from her WASP ancestry. Extravagant white fabrics—satin, linen, brocade, lace, and a long swath of bridal veil—drape over two horizontal poles hanging from the ceiling to form a backdrop. A few other props evoke the ranch, including a length of heavy white cotton rope loosely coiled on the floor, a trunklike white box on wheels, a black-and-white Mexican rug, and a white chair with a white cowboy hat hanging off the back. In flows a soundtrack of guitar music, playing Michele Brourman's original composition of the “Rancho Los Alamitos” theme. Hotchkis, in an all-white cowgirl dress and pants, enters, picks up the hat, gracefully but deliberately puts the nostalgic cap on her head. The environment is ready for her time travel back to the mythic ranch.

In many ways Tearsheets is a performance of Hotchkis's matrilineage. The embryo of this piece was conceived in the 1970s when Hotchkis discovered a diary written by her mother in 1912. She began interviewing her mother and her mother's sister and collecting ancient records from the ranch. The mass of materials acquired their shape as a self performance piece when Hotchkis took a workshop at Highways with Miller, who has acknowledged the influence of local feminist performances on his art. Hotchkis herself has participated in the feminist movement through the women's health movement in the 1970s. Tearsheets is, in this broader context, a feminist intervention into a particular segment of patriarchal culture seldom known to others.

Like pages torn and stolen from her upper-class ancestral lore, forbidden to be shared with outsiders, the sheets of white fabric are the scrolls of invisible writings, illuminated from time to time during Hotchkis's performance as she projects black-and-white photos of life on the
ranch. Hotchkis's mother, while a child, took most of these photos with a Christmas present—a pullout Kodak Brownie camera. Her mother's vision, then, both sustains and extends Hotchkis's search into family history, one that, in Tearsheets, allows the artist to tell stories about the women in her bloodline. By embodying these personas, the performer temporarily merges with their remembered voices, scents, gestures, and spirits. Her raised feminist consciousness, however, compels Hotchkis to recognize that her personal matrilineage is deeply misogynistic, repressed, and repressive. Women in the Bixby and Hotchkis clans were taught to follow the strict decorum of emotional reserve—no tears, no wild laughter, no acting out, no indulgent self-regard, no strong verbal expressions, such as using the tabooed adjective “beautiful” in lieu of the more proper “nice.” As Hotchkis tears down the veil of her foremothers' privilege to expose their powerlessness, the scrolls of white fabric transform into pristine bedsheets and tucked-away handkerchiefs drenched with invisible tears.

Tearsheets would not be possible without the stories behind those tears hidden under the sanitized façade of Hotchkis's family. Tearsheets is, in this respect, more than Hotchkis's “self” performance, for she virtually collaborates with her senior relatives in composing and enacting the piece. In the persona of Grandfather, for example, Hotchkis sings a popular ranch song, “Ragtime Cowboy Joe.” She lights a cigar, imitating the gesture of her Grandfather lighting a cigar in a huge close-up photo projected on and behind her (fig. 25). Remembering a swimming excursion with Grandmother, Hotchkis projects the slide of a young girl standing in the ocean on a long bridal veil, which she manipulates to imitate the waves. Her story quickly cuts to a last encounter with Grandmother in a garden, when the old woman was suffering from arthritis and progressive loss of speech. “You are burr. You are bee. Burry bee,” said Grandmother, gazing at her granddaughter. Then the old woman wrote down on a yellow pad what her tongue had just delivered like a childish non sequitur: “You are verybeautiful,” underlying “very” once and “beautiful” twice. Grandmother had broken her lifelong taboo. “More precious than her rings or her money,” Hotchkis shares, “those were her last word to me.”

Tears of nostalgia come with reminiscence of tender encounters. There are also tears of shame and of rage. “O give me a home where the buffalo roam, where the deer and the antelope play, where seldom is heard a discouraging word,” sings Hotchkis, who then violently punctures the idyllic ambiance to declare, “That’s a lie.” She overheard more than discouraging words at her Grandfather's fireside dominoes table, where the men joked about “jigaboos and coons, chinks and japs, kikes and of course women, silly women with their funny buzrooms.” But these same men would turn around and bestow generous gestures on the underclass, indiscriminately loaning money or animals to their cook or to a poor black farmer. “Between their kindness and their cruelty lay a chasm and one side refused to know that the other existed,” observes Hotchkis. She turns to the audience as her other collaborators and confides to them that the chasm of unself-conscious bigotry and hypocrisy was branded into her body, for she was taught that she is less than any man but better than billions of nonwhite others, and that, because of her superiority, she must be extremely nice to those less civilized and fortunate beings, while staying on guard at all times in case they steal, rape, or kill her.

“Invisible membranes like bulletproof glass wereinserted between you and me,” Hotchkis addresses her listeners poetically. The implications of this address, however, are far cruder than her poetry insinuates, both to the surro-gate “you” and the speaking “I.” For the only
other color besides white used in *Tearsheets* is red, the color of blood. In an elegant sequence of imagery that


links the superficial grandeur of her white set with the betrayal she senses as someone being tamed by that grandeur, Hotchkis compares herself to “apretty white shell with nothing inside but tiny empty rooms like a honeycomb with no honey.” “Something has been removed,” she muses about her own condition, while introducing a motif that will be carried into a crescendo toward the end.69

Hotchkis pursues her analogy between the raising of cattle and the raising of women and children on the ranch by employing an eccentric and visceral acting trope. Recorded sounds of a stampede turn the sterilized theatrical site into a butcher's block, as Hotchkis lowers her body, stretches out her back, and lets her two arms hang loosely in front of her to embody the character of a cow. She moos, staring nonchalantly at the audience, chewing her cud. Throughout the piece, Hotchkis sporadically suffers from surreal bovine spasms to become a cow. And, just as suddenly, she recovers from the spasms to resume her human performance. This theatrical metamorphosis enacts Hotchkis's voluntary identification with a creature that exists in the lower tier of the food chain on the ranch; it also suggests her own powerlessness to resist the analogous process of domestication that turns her into a proper woman/cow. She tells how her mother, taught to be a lady and a cowboy, learned not to urinate the whole day during cattle roundups—“We simply adjusted our physique,” said her mother. The same body discipline was enforced upon the daughter, as little Hotchkis was forbidden by her stern nanny—imported straight from Germany—to go to the bathroom after she was put to bed. She had
to urinate furtively into the dolly dishes in her room. Since her grandmother taught her mother that “a man's pride is more important than a girl's body,” her mother pretended not to see when her macho father played rough with her. Hotchkis herself unwittingly perpetuated the sexist pattern when she divorced a husband who was an antithesis to her father and got involved with a rough man who assaulted and raped her when she threatened to leave.

The cow metamorphosis and the motif of something being removed are fused and twisted in a culminating episode when Hotchkis recalls an operation to have a nonmalignant tumor removed from her left frontal lobe. In her Demerol-induced reverie, she conflates the neurosurgeon's procedure with that of a ranch foreman castrating a calf—her lemon-size tumor becoming the calf's testicles. I find this metaphorical conflation, with its visceral impact, both evocative and disturbing. The removal of the calf's ability to copulate and procreate is compared to the removal of young Hotchkis's unbridled vitality through a procedure that mentally castrates her. While the analogy is consistent with the motif of emotional removal built throughout the performance, Hotchkis's insertion of her brain surgery into this mix has unduly clouded her metaphors. Neurosurgery that invades the skull so as to heal the brain is hardly comparable to an anthropocentric technology that sterilizes an animal. One may argue that the danger involved in the neurosurgery warrants its comparison to a cruel procedure like a calf's castration. Indeed, that seems to be what Hotchkis is driving at in the scene. She describes how she felt like a clairvoyant right before and after the removal of her brain tumor: “While I'm falling in the chasm I can see the pearl below…. I stand in this place where something was removed. I speak. I wait. And my eyes do not close.” Through an affliction, her statement implies, she gains the gift of an enlightened tongue.

In a telling moment in *Tearsheets*, Hotchkis likens herself to her Grandfather's ranch today, which has been turned into a “living historic site,” stripped of odors, animals, and vitality. By engaging in a self-critical performance such as *Tearsheets*, however, the mature artist is able to demythify the whiteness festering in the untold history of a “living historic site,” even as she fills up her “empty rooms” with honey and odors.

**EXORCISING MY MYTHOLOGIES, OR TALES FROM A BITCH GIRL, BY DANIELLE BRAZELL**

Almost right after the premiere of her first full-length self performance at Highways, Brazell changed the title of her piece *Exorcising My Mythologies* (1997) to *Tales from a Bitch Girl*. The new title is a stronger and more fitting appellation for the piece. While *Exorcising My Mythologies* mixes Greek theogony with Catholic theology, *Tales from a Bitch Girl* shifts Brazell's self-portraiture to a cool pop-cultural context revolving around such trends as “bad girls” or “girl power” developed by women from the post-baby boom generations. Besides being a more updated and vernacular lingo, the changed title dissociates Brazell's autobiographical action from an apologetic tone and adds inflections of positivity, autonomy, and aggressive self-assertion.

*Exorcising My Mythologies* frames the performance as an exorcism, which is, in essence, reactive and, by intent, therapeutic: a purging of those who have possessed her body/mind/flesh/psyche. Her “mythologies” performed as vignettes are then, by implication, her maladies. These interlocking references establish the performer's roles as a priest who exorcises and a victim who suffers from debilitating “mythologies.” The new title, in contrast,
declares the artist's identity as a “bitch girl” and situates her vignettes in a creative rather than a reactive mood. While she may still be haunted by the same “mythologies,” the artist-bitch girl promises that she has also gained a measure of control over those maladies by turning them into “tales,” which are, after all, stories, fantasies, and experiences reprocessed by art.

Brazell was not the only one who had second thoughts about the original title. Ron Athey, in reviewing *Exorcising My Mythologies* for *L.A. Weekly*, halfjokingly suggests that a better title would be *The Phenomenon of Big Little*,

which is his “explanation for any 30-plus-year-old woman who wears Betsy Johnson little-girl dresses and talks in a baby voice.” Athey's comment captures Brazell's quintessential persona in her self-enactment, which appears to vacillate between fabulated autobiographies and reappropriated collective memories.

On stage right at Highways stands a child-size dollhouse, complete with a roof, a functional door, and a window with painted shades opened wide. Next to the house stands a supermarket shopping cart, which contains a hairless doll in a pink dress and other assorted toys. A clothesline with towels, dresses, and pants stretches the length of the stage, its edge covered by fallen leaves. Hidden inside the dollhouse, Brazell starts her performance with an anursery rhyme—“I'm a little teapot”—interrupted by a peal of laughter and a dialogue with an invisible character, “You're not so bad. You can't hurt me. I'm a witch girl. I can cast a spell over me.” She then turns her attention to the immediate “you”—the audience: “I see you. Ha, ha, ha! I have all the power in the universe. You can't hurt me. I see you.” Brazell in her little girl persona peeps out of her dollhouse window and proceeds to identify some of her spectators by name, “All my friends are here. Hey, you guys, want to play?”

In white underwear and underpants, Brazell crawls out of her dollhouse, raising a little round mirror in front of her, staring at the audience with one eye hidden behind the mirror, turning the mirror into both amagnifying glass (to scrutinize her others) and an eye shield (to hide her self). She laughs and raises her arms in a triumphant gesture to announce openly that she is a witch girl and she wants all the power of the universe. She pushes the shopping cart around, riding it, and begins to play a “let's pretend” game. She picks up a toy helmet, a fake crown, a plastic stethoscope, a pair of handcuffs, and a binocular to turn randomly selected audience members into canonical American characters: a fireman, a beauty queen, a doctor, a cop, and a spy. “I'm the most powerful, baddest, and meanest,” she warns her instant entourage, “don't betray me.”

Despite a sense of perverse humor arising from the distance between the performer's mature female figure and her girlish persona, Brazell's opening episode is more disturbing than amusing. The impression is one of forced innocence or arrested prepubescence, as if the performer were simultaneously resisting, failing to register, and calling attention to the corporeal imprints of her sexuality. Like the doll caught in the shopping cart, she is agirl child caught inside the cage of her adult body. Brazell reinforces her identification with the doll in the next episode, when she rescues the doll from the cart and removes its pink dress—“she feels she is in drag”—to reveal a white undershirt and underpants in a style identical to her own. She turns her shopping cart-cumwitch girl limousine upside down, making a little cradle for her doll out of
the cart's dangling kiddie seat pocket. While she feeds the doll with a toy teacup, Brazell tells a story about a little girl who lives with a dirty sister, a dirty brother, and a dirty mother, and who feels inherently dirty herself. The girl wants to save herself and to be clean, so “she pretends to be one of them, but knowing that she is different… She isn't growing up to have nasty, dirty, ugly sex … she decides to fit in.”

The class-based insecurity and trauma-based sexual phobia that scar the “little girl” in Brazell's story recur as motifs in subsequent episodes, when Brazell takes on the personas of a bitter bitch girl and of a defenseless girl child tormented by incestuous dreams. The external structure of the dollhouse is raised beyond view to transform the whole stage into its interior. In the living quarters, with a towel covering her hair, Brazell sits guzzling beer and barking at a TV character, whom she calls “askinny ass little white trash ghetto whore girl” who “thinks she is so pretty.” “You can take the girl out of the ghetto, but you can't take the ghetto out of the girl,” the bitch girl comments, crushing her beer can. In the bedroom, a much more horrific scene unfolds. Bathed in a red light, Brazell's girl child jumps up and down on the mattress, describing how evil comes to her in a dream, disguising himself as pleasure. She desires the pleasure, but she feels soiled by her desire. “If it's so great, then how can it be so wrong?” she asks, raising a question that defies an easy answer.

As a performance that comes after more than two decades of feminist interrogation and the popular media's recent exploitation of the traumas of incest, child molestation, classist oppression, and patriarchal domination, Tales from a Bitch Girl (fig. 26) has an inevitable disadvantage. It deals with some issues that have become overly saturated in cultural representations, even though those issues remain relevant and de/pressing in many people's lives. Brazell's piece reiterates the need to probe those social and individual traumas. Some of her tales, however, are burdened by clichés. The politics of her performance in those instances becomes rather subdued, not because she has not pronounced it forcefully in her show, but because similar discourses have been heard too many times in the general cultural circulation. Brazell is in fact so eager to convey her politics that she breaks character in the mattress-jumping scene to launch into a tirade in her artist's voice. “I went to your school, churches … I participate in your family value. Something is wrong with the way we define our roles…. Who defines culture? The artist, the politician, the poet, MTV, the Gaps, academics, theologians, fanatics, the Citi Bank?” While her questions are intriguing, I am not sure if the moment of her questioning is well placed in her performance. The moment seems to me unearned, a transition so convenient that effectively turns the artist's questions into interpolations, a discursive deus ex machina refashioned as the speaking subject's own claim to cultural ownership. Such an unearned transition is echoed by a certain lack.
of dialectical self-inquisition in another episode, when Brazell strips naked, wearing only a pair of high heels and carrying a handbag. She presents herself as a skinless woman who
walks to work and complains about her humiliation as a secretary. I may use Brazell's assertion in the scene about the value of survival to question her polemics. No matter how subservient she feels, her own complicity within the capitalist system points to the unacknowledged benefits that lure her into the corporate survival games in the first place.

What remains most enjoyable for me in *Tales from a Bitch Girl* is not Brazell's politics, but her aesthetics, conveyed in a mixture of conceptual ingenuity and theatrical panache. My comment may sound retrogressive in light of the feminist endeavor to conflate politics and aesthetics. Nevertheless, I contend, no single ideological proposition/interdiction can be perpetually valid and efficacious, whereas the ways used to convey that proposition are bound by a different set of evaluative criteria. I suggest that the divergence between an ideological position (such as feminism) and an aesthetic treatment (such as theatrical techniques) reflects the difference between a redressive and an art performance. Redressive performance addresses a specific agenda; art performance utilizes particular techniques. Being both redressive and an art performance, *Tales from a Bitch Girl* is subject to the evaluative criteria of both.¹⁷⁵

To explode the myth of the nuclear family, for example, Brazell uses the concept of play house and taking on roles. The concept at once renders all supposed family values into artificial constructs and exposes how these dominant values have been insidiously inculcated in our lives, even when we are playing children's games. Brazell also pursues the child-play conceit in theatrical terms. She turns to the costumes hanging on the clothesline from time to time as a transition between roles; she also uses her available props imaginatively. In a highly effective scene, Brazell duct-tapes a dress on her front body, alluding to the paper-doll game. Then she kneels on top of the overturned shopping cart—with her alter-ego doll locked inside the cart—to get ready for her first holy confession. She prays to the Catholic God as earnestly as her twelve-year-old persona can. But before she finishes her “Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned,” her persona as the priest moves on impatiently to a list of sins by number. The priest delivers these sins so fast that she can hardly keep up answering “yes” or “no.” She is a girl child caught in a breathless quiz show between heaven and hell, while the priest peddles out his shopping list of atonement routines.

It is in quirky details like these that Brazell's tales shine.

**MONKHOOD IN THREE EASY LESSONS BY DAN KWONG**

The title for Kwong's self performance, *Monkhood in Three Easy Lessons* (1993), signals the two primary cultural realities that constitute the artist's personal identity: his ethnicity as a man of Asian (Chinese/Japanese) ancestry born and raised in L.A., and his residency in a media-saturated, image-obsessed city perched on the edge of the North American land mass and the Pacific Ocean.¹⁷⁶ “Monkhood” puns on stereotypes of Asian American men as reclusive sages well versed in “Oriental” spirituality and as practically sexless beings. The rest of the title plays on the all-American self-help culture, aided by do-it-yourself manuals, one-stop home-improvement shops, and predigest TV infomercials. Fusing these disparate elements together as a moniker for his self performance suggests Kwong's attempt to tackle popular culture's image of racialized and desexualized Asian American manhood and to offer accessible lessons about a putatively trouble-free citizen from a silent minority. Half-earnest in its tone, the title *Monkhood in Three Easy Lessons* also hints
at the piece's predominant strategies: quotation, parody, and alternative history—all peppered with humor and supported by multimedia polish.

A barely discernible hooded and cloaked figure raising a little lantern moves slowly across the darkened stage, with the only other source of light coming from an enigmatic square of blue shimmering suspended in midair. The music of gongs, bells, humming, and other “ethereal” tones from an electronic keyboard is punctuated by long stretches of deep breathing. “Breathe in,” the monkish figure intones in an amplified whisper, “the oneness of the unknowable void. [Sound of breathing.] Allow your mind to detach itself from all worldly concerns.” Monkhood in Three Easy Lessons unfolds like a well-packaged performance landscape, brimming with mediated pastiches reminiscent of the heavy-breathing Darth Vader from Star Wars, the rosary-chanting medieval monks from The Name of the Rose, and any stereotypical Zen master from the mysterious East. Suddenly this part-retro, part-sci-fi façade of sublimity is punctured by a broadcast whisper, “Let your hand resist all desires to touch … that dial.” With the lantern swinging, the figure promises, “We'll be back after these words from our sponsors.”

Monkhood in Three Easy Lessons addresses cultural mis/conceptions about Asian American men by taking on one of the most effective mass-media instruments in producing and perpetuating stereotypes: television. Kwong's relationship with this mass communication vehicle, however, is more symbiotic than antagonistic. He appropriates the stylistic, structural, and technological languages of television in order to transmit his own messages and to disseminate counterstereotypes. As Kwong wittily conveys in a sequence of kinesthetic snapshots about his childhood, he was “a boy who watched TV, who watched TV, who watched TV.” The flow of television images is incorporated into Kwong's selfhood as a perpetually running channel, similar to the huge square of blue shimmers radiating from his opening vignette. The piece is composed like a television program, joining miscellaneous comic skits and mock lectures with serious portrayals of family members and prerecorded video of dramatic features. The general theme behind these disparate acts is, as Kwong writes in his “Artist's Statement,” his “retrospective/introspective” journey “through the universe of the self.” Kwong's vessel for that journey is a multimedia live performance in the format of televised broadcasting. “I broadcast, therefore I am,” says the artist in the persona of a samurai, delivering existential lessons by cutting off dangling objects from their vertical lines, as if he were overcoming obstacles in life (fig. 27).

Two episodes exemplify the lighthearted “entertainment values” connoted by the television format. The window of blue shimmers transforms into a television screen for the “Channel 4 Evening News with Bill Onigiri.” Kwong, on TV as the blurry-eyed news anchor Onigiri, wipes aside disheveled hair from his blond wig to introduce reporter Tracy Toobright, who is in the maternity ward covering the birth of a sports celebrity, Dan Kwong. Kwong’s head is linked to a puppet infant's body with a diaper, two boxing arms attached to maneuverable sticks, and a pair of angel wings. During his “live” postpartum interview on TV, the newborn star confesses that, as the only son coming out of “the gene pool of a typical dysfunctional family,” he will exhibit all male traits, such as brutality, mistreatment of others, sexism, and racism, but he plans anyway to contribute to the family—since for the next eighteen years he must depend on the family for survival. “He sounds like a pretty weird baby,” concludes the anchor Onigiri.
If the infant star episode comments on Kwong's acculturated supremacy as a male born into a patriarchal culture, another episode questions whether the male supremacy is an equal inheritance for all males. Kwong relates how his adolescent search for sexuality led him to read an expert's column in *Penthouse* penned by “The Happy Hooker,” who alleges that only Oriental men have problems with virility, due to the small size of their penises. Characteristically, Kwong chooses not to attack but to push the racist stereotype to its hilarious extreme. Enter Kwong in the persona of a geekish professor who lectures on penile enlargement surgery. With graphic illustrations, he demonstrates resulting mutations: a penis shaped like a barometer with a blown-up end; a penis with a body builder's muscles; a penis with a shark's fin on the side; and a penis with a Jimmy Hoffa face. Just leave our Mother Nature alone, the professor advises: “It matters less the size of your wok than the food you wok with.”

Not all racist defamation can be neutralized by caricatures; nor does Kwong always hide behind his plainly histrionic character types to avoid decrying vicious stereotypes. Kwong launches into his project of producing alternative history with an episode about his Japanese grandfather, who came to the United States in the 1930s and contributed so much to the Japanese American community in L.A. that “his name made it onto the FBI's A-list.” During World War II, like other Japanese Americans, Kwong's grandfather was considered “a dangerous enemy alien” and sent to an internment camp, even though he had two sons fighting for the United States. “I am tendering two of my dearest possessions to the U.S.,” the old man wrote in a letter to a Caucasian friend in L.A. “Who can do more?”

This unjust history still haunts the Asian American artist today. The stage is dimmed but animated by amplified sounds of a heart pounding rhythmically, interspersed with some beeps and oceanic echoes. Video messages on the screen inform that the sounds come from “the Aorta, the Main Artery of the Heart,” and that they are “Recorded in the Uterus of a Woman 8 Months Pregnant.” The prenatal sounds of a fetus shielded by a uterus highlight the universality of human existence as *Homo sapiens*, exposing in reverse the discriminatory system into which an individual is destined to be born as arbitrary and socially constructed. The sonic environment heralds the artist's ensuing action, which critiques his acculturation as an “other” in his native land. Kwong, lit by a mobile spotlight and wearing only a Japanese wrestler’s *fun doshi*, stands on a treadmill, introducing himself as a Sansei who despises all those “wimpy Nisei” that used the war to prove their patriotism. Kwong carries on his composition of alternative American history by bringing up the rarely heard story of the No No Boys: the Nisei who refused to swear allegiance to the United States and to be conscripted into military service. Like a defiant No No Boy, Kwong runs on the accelerating treadmill and throws out questions in a roll call of racist and sexist prejudices: “Am I ethnic enough for you?… Am I authentic enough for you? Am I MTV enough for you? Am I inscrutable enough for you?” “How am I?” He picks up speed on the treadmill. “Am I virile enough for you? Am I good enough for you?”

The distance between his Issei grandfather, who felt grateful to the United States even when he was wronged, and the rebellious Nisei No No Boys demolishes the supposed homogeneity of Asian Americans. Kwong himself is the living proof of the heterogeneity and contradictions within Asian Americans, for he is torn between his mixed Chinese and Japanese heritage. *Monk-hood in Three Easy Lessons* closes with an anecdote about Kwong's Chinese grandfather, a mild-mannered man who was the antithesis of his punctilious Japanese grandfather. Because of the legal restrictions on Chinese women's immigration, Kwong's Chinese grandfather lived out most of his life as a loner; his “monkhood” was an enforced discipline. The senior Kwong's personal destiny reflects the historical condition of other Chinese immigrants in the early twentieth century. As Lisa Lowe elucidates:

In conjunction with the relative absence of Chinese wives and family among immigrant “bachelor” communities and because of the concentration of Chinese men in “feminized” forms of work—such as laundry, restaurants, and other service-sector jobs—Chinese male immigrants could be said to occupy, before 1940, a “feminized” position in relation to white male citizens and, after 1940, a “masculinity” whose racialization is the material trace of the history of this “gendering.”[^78]

The external oppression endured by Kwong's grandfather found a miniature duplicate at home as his own grandchildren dubbed him “a classic Chinaman” and blamed him for his lack of manliness. “I can't find any hero in him, no right stuff to make him more studly,” complains the grandson. Not only did Kwong and his sister adopt the stereotypical/normative standard to judge their grandfather, but they also played mischief on him. Since the old man loved to hear his own voice sing, the children used to demand that he sing from a telephone book or an encyclopedia. The old man never took offense and would not discriminate against anything as singing material. Although the old man complies with the children's wish to ridicule him, he simultaneously asserts his own will as one who delights in singing. Expressions of strength and weakness are, then, subtler than what they seem. I wonder if Kwong's own self-deprecating humor isn't a lesson learned from his Chinese grandfather to soften others' resistance to his song?
HEADLESS TURTLENECK RELATIVES BY DENISE UYEHARA

Uyehara created *Headless Turtleneck Relatives: The Tale of Family and a Grandmother's Suicide by Fire* (1992/93) a decade after a cataclysmic incident in her life: her Japanese grandmother's self-immolation in 1982, when the artist was a freshman at the University of California at Irvine. Something in Uyehara's consciousness seems to have been loosened at that moment of family trauma, although she did not know how to address it until a decade later, when she produced her first full-length self performance that pays tribute to her grandmother.\[79\] Uyehara's case resembles what Jonathan Shay writes about post-traumatic survival:

Severe trauma explodes the cohesion of consciousness. When a survivor creates a fully realized narrative that brings together the shattered knowledge of what happened, the emotions that were aroused by the meanings of the events, and the bodily sensations that the physical events created, the survivor pieces back together the fragmentation of consciousness that trauma has caused.\[80\]

*Headless Turtleneck Relatives* is, in this clinical context, a “fully realized narrative” through which Uyehara retrieves the shattered link in her autobiography from her grandmother's abrupt and violent suicide. Something has indeed become loosened in Uyehara, yet her self performance enables her to revisit that gap as an impetus for remembrance rather than as a loss that devastates all thought. She transforms her trauma into a liberating event, whereby she becomes reconciled with her grandmother's decision to expedite her own mortal transcendence by fire. As seen in *Headless Turtleneck Relatives*, Uyehara's attempt to cohere her fractured consciousness emerges less as a naturalistic re-creation of “Whatever has happened to my suicidal Grandmother?” than as a phantasmic melting of all boundaries between the past and the present, memories and dreams, the dead and the living. Uyehara sings the Japanese songs her grandmother used to sing and evokes the old woman through her accent and movements. She appears not only to have reunited with the spirit of the dearly departed but to become from time to time the dead, a friendly ghost who always insisted during her earthly tenure that “it's good to share”—to share food, to share songs, and to share stories.

“Mo mo Tarosan, mo mo Tarosan,” a Japanese children's song about a little hero who embarks on an adventure with a pack of loyal animals, breaks the silence of the darkened stage.\[81\] In contrast to the clear, resounding voice, a shadowy figure moves clumsily forward. In a gradually intensifying eerie glow, the figure reveals itself to be a headless human-size puppet made of a stretched-out red turtleneck. Utterly unaware of her own strangeness as a blank mobile body, the headless turtleneck ghost cordially invites the audience to eat her Japanese fish cakes—*Kamaboko*. “You come to Grandma's house, you have to eat,” the ghost tells us in a heavy foreign accent. “Ah, so many people. OK, next time I bring more. You all have to share. It's good to share. You all have to share.” The ghost turns a circle and raises two half-moon-shaped fish cakes on top of her turtleneck as if they were her eyes.

Dropping the foreign accent, the ghost starts rapping, “her face, her cheeks, her lips, soft, pink, like a fish cake, her face … until I touched her.” Uyehara’s head emerges from the turtleneck. She touches her own cheek gently, smiles at the audience, and starts singing “Mo mo Tarosan” once again. “Merry Christmas, Grandma.” The song leads to a greeting to her grandmother, as Uyehara lowers her body to become a child, with her face turning upward.
and her right hand touching her head repeatedly—an affectionate, if slightly overwhelming, gesture from Grandma (fig. 28). Disco music by Michael Jackson breaks into the scene. Uyehara darts about like a frightened chicken, cackling frantically as she removes the turtleneck and wraps it around her head like a fashionable hat—she has transformed into a typical American teenager, preening and admiring herself in front of the mirror, psyching up for her big night out. “I'm nothing like my relatives,” she reassures her own reflection in the mirror. “My family is so shy. I'm the Wonder Woman. I don't have relatives because I'm the queen of Asia. I'm getting ready. Here I come.”

This opening sequence exhibits the major performance techniques in *Headless Turtleneck Relatives*. A central “prosthetic” device, the red turtleneck is first introduced as a symbolic and figurative substitute for Uyehara's missing grandmother. It is then incorporated as a variable costume that signals the performer's transitions between characters and episodes. The artist takes on diverse personas from her mnemonic archives, portraying some roles that mark a dialectic distance from her family. Uyehara brings out the rebellious teenager early on, for example, lest she become locked into the overly pious stereotype of the self-effacing “good Asian daughter.” In this way, she steers away from the sentimentality that might ironically reduce the emotional impact of a work based on collective family memories.

Uyehara, as the Japanese American artist, is a constant presence in all her character portrayals. She both becomes her others by taking on their accents and manners and remains herself as the narrative consciousness, the speaking subject, or the addressee in the dialogue.
Uncannily, her grandmother's spirit also seems to hover over the performance. The old woman is there either as a character or as an invisible witness. As the entrance ritual links the grandmother with the turtleneck, the shirt's simple and suggestive recurrence in every scene acts as an ubiquitous reminder of the residing spirit, to whom the piece is dedicated as a filial offering. The fluidity with which Uyehara moves among altering realities unmoors her action from the realistic framework of a terrestrial time-space. The performer proceeds in a limbo, a hetero-locus bordering between being and nonbeing, between the land of elastic flesh and warm breaths and the zone of weightless spirits and transparent shadows.

“It's good to share,” the grandmother's coaxing motto, is heard by the grown Uyehara as a motivation for her art, especially given that her family stories shed light on a hidden stretch of U.S. history. In a powerful episode Uyehara conveys the sting of racism by repeatedly slapping one palm against another on an outstretched arm. She slips into the persona of a Caucasian American grade school teacher who praises her for being a “nice Oriental girl,” urges her to open her eyes a little wider while she sings, and confides in her, “You people are almost white, not like those colored people, those people of color.” The teacher offers the young Uyehara instant epithets for her family members, whom she “just loves”: her father the “little fat Buddha,” her mother the almost-white smiler, and her grandmother the one “who always turns the other cheek.” The teacher'scondescension teeters between racialized stereotypes and racist pride in the supposed superiority of being “white.” Seen from the daughter's perspective, however, her third-generation Japanese American parents, both scientists by profession, are much more culturally independent. Uyehara relates how her straitlaced parents have recently been contaminated by the karaoke fad from Japan. Wearing a jacket on top of her red turtleneck and sporting a microphone with fanfare, Uyehara imitates her father singing his karaoke version of the popular song “My Way,” with altered lyrics:

You see, my kid, the time has come. Let's have some fun.
I work here hard, all of my life. I want to sing, so does my wife.
I faced it all, and I stood tall. I did it My Way.

“But dad,” the daughter interjects, “isn't it a white man's song?” “No, it's not,” her dad replies, flowing with the music, “It's my song.”

The endeavor to survive his own American dream implied by Mr. Uyehara's song resonates poignantly in the next episode, as the artist brings up the history of the Japanese American internment during World War II. What's extraordinary about her treatment of this piece of history is Uyehara's insistence that the whole event could happen again today. “It's 1993…. It's 1993 and the Japanese attack the Pearl Harbor.” She is hanging out with her friends at their favorite bar, watching the TV news about the Pearl Harbor attack. They stop drinking because they “vaguely remember that something has happened to some Americans after the Pearl Harbor, that some Americans are not so good anymore.” In a state of great anxiety, Uyehara unfolds a piece of white fabric on the floor and throws some records on it. She puts on a pair of glasses, mutters to herself that she can take only what she can carry, and starts smashing the records to pieces. The heart-rending image comes from Uyehara's family album of unshot memories. Before the government came to take her family, along with a hundred ten thousand other Japanese Americans, to the internment camps, her grandmother chose to break and burn every Japanese thing she owned—books, kimonos, music records. Uyehara wraps the broken records in a bundle and shifts to her grandmother's voice: “I tell you this story because you are young, and I am old. I tell you this because you won't read it in the history
books. I tell you this, so you won't let this kind of thing happen to anyone again. I tell you this because it's good to share."

The different episodes in *Headless Turtleneck Relatives* vary in their emotional timbres. Their intensity reaches the zenith in the last two contrasting episodes. Uyehara, dressed like a Japanese cook, with the red turtleneck wrapped around her waist, stands next to a table lined up with ornamental Japanese utensils and some vegetables and ingredients. In a silent series of cooking procedures, Uyehara prepares a bowl of the *ozoni* soup that her grandmother used to make for *oshogatsu* (the New Year holiday). She raises the bowl in the air and greets her grandmother, “Merry Christmas, Grandmother, and Happy New Year.”

An offering before a final reckoning: the piece's last monologue recalls Shay's analysis about the trauma survivor's curative need to reproduce the emotions and bodily sensations associated with the traumatic event. Uyehara, dressed in black without the red turtleneck, sits in front of a large white canvas. She thrusts her arms backward from time to time to draw charcoal marks on the left and right edges of the canvas, while she mimes the sequence of Grandmother's suicide—driving carefully to a parking lot; locking herself inside her car; pouring gasoline meticulously on the dashboard, the seats, and all over her own body and hair; and then gleefully lighting a match. Uyehara shifts between the wailing of a fire engine rushing to the scene and Grandmother's delirious euphoria in performing her last mortal act. Then, alternating between two voices, Uyehara recounts a post-traumatic dream encounter, in which Grandmother calmly explains that she had a wonderful life, but it's time for her to leave. She had tried other forms of suicide before, but her body would not quit—"there's nothing worse than kill yourself except failing to kill yourself"—so this time she made sure that she could really depart to the spirit world, to join her beloved husband there.

I don't think the dream has solved the mystery of the old woman's selfimmolation, but it does reflect the artist's understanding and approval of her grandmother's final body act. Uyehara washes the charcoal off her hands, sings a Japanese song, and places a neatly folded red turtleneck in front of the canvas. The canvas looks eerily like a woman's face, with charcoal hair on two sides, a serene red for lips, and other features absent from/hidden in the recess at the center.

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**ASSIMILATION BY SHISHIR KURUP**

Kurup's 1991 multidimensional exploration of assimilation as a set of cultural strategies begins with a simple but grotesque gesture. Standing in a central pool of light, he pours an excessive amount of baby powder into his hands, slaps the powder onto his dark-skinned face, and smears the chalky white on his facial surface (fig. 29). He freezes his ghastly white mask in a broad smile, like a clown caught in a tragic farce.

Before the onstage action, we heard a recorded dialogue: A boy calls, “Mame, I'm going out to play”; the mother responds, “Put some powder on mone.” “But I hate powder.” “Be my golden son now.” The dialogue frames Kurup's self-defacement in the context of a childhood ritual that his mother demanded he perform whenever he appeared in a public place, even just to go out to play. The reminiscent scene happens in postcolonial Mumbai (Bombay), India, where Kurup was born. His mother's coaxing but firm command reflects her internalization of the residual imperial and colonial valuation, which has maintained a hierarchy of skin colors.
through India's ancient caste system and subsequently through British rule on the subcontinent. Kurup's frozen smile signals his own dubiousness about his mother's assimilationist stance, which self-consciously puts her son's genetic/physiological particularities in abeyance so that he may mimic the Vedic and Caucasian criteria of superiority, beauty, and self-worth. Kurup, in turn, displays his imitation of whiteness as a failure, both by default and by excess. His inability to incorporate the whiteness without distortion heightens the discrepancy between his clownish mimicry and his as-yet-inarticulate self-identity. We don't know exactly who he is, but we do know that he is not what he looks like at the moment.

Kurup's dramaturgy of failed mimesis concurs with the cultural critic Homi Bhabha's analysis of colonial mimicry as “an ironic compromise.” According to Bhabha, mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal. Mimicry is, thus, the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation, and discipline, which “appropriates” the Other as it visualizes power. Mimicry is also the sign of the inappropriate, however, a difference or recalcitrance which coheres the dominant strategic function of colonial power, intensifies surveillance, and poses an immanent threat to both “normalized” knowledges and disciplinary powers.

By exaggerating his failure to produce a “natural” white skin, Kurup comments on his own mimicry as an action that disavows his Indian identity, while ironically confirming his inadequacy in appropriating the image of his powerful Other. His clownish whiteface, an inversion of the minstrel blackface, thus signifies the inappropriateness of his disguise, which, rather than erasing his difference, dramatizes both the recalcitrance of his nonwhite identity and the slippage of his assimilationist strategy. The twist in Kurup's scene comes from the gentle insistence of his mother's voice. “Be my golden son now” is her response to the kid's resistance to putting on the powder. She is the source of endearment and protection for the young Kurup, but she is also the agent who infiltrates her son's self-respect with distorted judgment. Because of her internalized oppression as a residual colonized subject, she turns her golden son into the gilded image of his own self-mockery.

Kurup's opening episode represents assimilation in its more familiar connotation as a subaltern subject's attempted appropriation of hegemonic cultural values. His clownish gestus criticizes this act of appropriation as a problematic scheme for an oppressed individual to survive cultural shocks. But Kurup's self performance does not stop at being a critique of assimilation as an over-contaminated strategy. Instead, it seizes on assimilation as a dynamic process of cross-cultural negotiations. Just as the tactic of mimicry is streaked with indeterminacy, so assimilation is not a fixed, unidirectional technique of cultural absorption. Kurup's modular piece explores assimilation as a primary life experience for a diasporic cultural traveler like himself. He takes the chimerical process as the lens through which he assesses the different stations in his autobiographical trajectory, which has passed through three continents (Asia, Africa, North America) before reaching L.A., where the artist/actor finally became naturalized as an (Indo-African) American citizen.

“I have been the other from the day I was born,” writes the artist in his essay “In Between Space.”[84] Being a nomad for a greater part of his life means that the sense of displacement is his normative existential condition. Kurup felt out of place even in his birthplace, because he was a southerner (from Kerala) born in the northern city of Bombay, where the majority of residents spoke a dialect foreign to his ears. When his parents settled on the East African island of Mombasa, in Kenya, he was seen as a migrant Indian child (a banyan i toto) in a thriving international trade emporium where the native Africans (Mafriques) were exploited by both the brown-skinned (Banyani) and white-skinned (Muzungu) foreigners.[85] Emigrating with his family to this country, he suddenly found himself a multilingual Afro-Asian immigrant who needed to learn yet another lingo and another system of racial dynamics in Milwaukee. Assimilation is in this sense an impressionistic travelogue composed by an other subject who can never retire from the assimilationist process of becoming a chameleon in an ever-changing mottled environment.

Kurup's self performance dissects assimilation in its multiple aspects—some mandatory and constructive; others prejudicial, disruptive, and self-dissembling. What I find most refreshing in his approach to this contentious topic is that he privileges both the centrality and mobility of his perceptual angle. In the opening episode he views assimilation from the standpoint of an other subject who both resists and is to some degree oppressed by the need to assimilate. In other episodes, however, he assumes the agency of a conscious epistemic subject. At times he regards assimilation as an adventure into curious terrains of otherness; at other times he holds assimilation as an interactive drama through which the power dynamic between the “host” and the “guest” may be reversed, when an immigrant like himself assumes the structurally central position to teach others how to assimilate to his cultural values. The depth of Kurup's investigation results from his vacillation among divergent positions, which turn assimilation into a transformative force that implicates both the subject who assimilates and the culture being assimilated.

In the episode following his whiteface mimicry, for example, Kurup turns his table around to view the United States as a bizarre Other from his twelve-year-old Afro-Indian child's perspective. He enumerates five “mythic fears” he had about “coming to America”—all prompted by stereotypical assumptions concerning: (1) this country's frantic lifestyle: “Americans loved to go streaking”; (2) its illogical, slangy language heard from an ear accustomed to the British English: “[Americans] loved double negatives... ‘I didn't do nothin’”; (3) its people’s abominable hygiene: “Like the British they didn't wash their ass, just wiped it with toilet paper. This frightened us.”; (4) its experiment with precocious individual
freedom: “Every single American had smoked marijuana by the age of twelve”; (5) its feminist emancipation: “Every single American girl had had sex by the age of twelve.” The humor of this vignette comes from hyperbole as well as inversion: What is norm becomes other; what is other becomes mythologically grotesque or hideously tantalizing. Xenophobia, literally the fear of the other, is displaced from its familiar pejorative ring to become both a risible myth-making machine and the very rationale preventing one from cultural assimilation.

Much of the amusement in Assimilation arises from Kurup's treatment of the theme as an open-ended route traversed by cross-cultural confusion. The obverse side of “mythic fear” is a genuine mis-embrace of cultural detritus as essence. In an episode called “Fat Family,” Kurup describes his family's ecstatic encounter with American fast food, which appealed to the new immigrants because of its exotic difference from the “neither convenient nor fast” Indian food. Compared to his childhood terror of seeing a chicken being decapitated in the open market for his Indian meal, he was thrilled to devour a “historyless hamburger, charbroiled” in any fast-food joint. Kurup pulls out an old snapshot as an evidence of his family's newfound happiness, which produced, in their household of three, “a combined weight equal to that of the Bulgarian Olympic weightlifting team.”

If acquiring a new appetite was the happiest item on Kurup's assimilation list, then the adoption of a new tongue came to a close second. Wearing a cap backward and a loose jacket, Kurup transforms into his teenage buddy Tom, whose accent and manners suggest that he might be African American. Tom's monologue meanders through his fascination with the Hollywood versions of Africa, filled with mud huts and vine-swinging Tarzans. The two friends' cultural exchange quickly zeros in on curse words. The jokes in the scene derive from their misunderstanding of each other's vocabularies, a confusion owing to Kurup's British accent and Tom's Ebonic English. They end up collecting each other's curses in Swahili (from East Africa), Kutchee (from South India), and Ebonics (from all over the United States).

Kurup is a talented mimic, despite his ambivalence toward self-effacement in his whiteface mimicry ritual. As an actor, he is trained to incorporate myriad others and to project their gestures and voices from within the locus of the self. His talent and training allow him to mimic other bodies as part of his ongoing assimilation during various cultural journeys. On an profound psychosomatic level, these others have become inseparable from his selfhood, for they continue to haunt/inhabit his memories. Significantly all the characters whom Kurup mimes in Assimilation—including his American friend Tom, an old Mombasa street peddler called Mzee, two Palestinian food-mart clerks who call themselves Art and Bill, and a Thai restaurant hostess, Dahng—belong to the class that in Britain is identified as “black” and in the United States as “multicultural.” Kurup's selective “character” assimilation, then, indicates his sense of personal identification.

Kurup's selective cultural affinity is in large measure a predetermined behavior, for his sense of emotional and cultural positioning is not so subtly enforced by society-at-large. In an episode alluding to Stanislavski's famous book An Actor Prepares, Kurup appears as himself getting ready for an audition. He drifts from the horrible script at hand to a memorized monologue from Shakespeare's Merchant of Venice: “Mislike me not for my complexion / The shadowed livery of the burnished sun / To whom I am a neighbour and near bred.” Then, to his disgust but not surprise, the casting director who thought Merchant of Venice was a film by Bertolucci only wants the actor to play “the Gandhi thing” for a medical doctor's role. Racism may expose itself to Kurup's adult judgment as social injustice and plain ignorance.
To a child, however, racism is easily internalized as unself-conscious adulation of the supposed superior other. In Dahng's persona, Kurup relates an incident that had recently happened to her five-year-old daughter, Susie, adopted from Thailand. After hearing the judge in the Immigration and Naturalization office announce, “Susie, you're now an American,” the little girl asked innocently, “When I get my blue eyes?”

“I see with abrown eye. I see with ablack eye. I speak with awhite mouth,” mutters Kurup's voice from an audiotape, as he moves across the stage in a slow-motion Butoh stroll. Although Kurup has certainly mastered “the father tongue” required for his “passing,” he takes his self performance as an opportunity to assert that cultural assimilation is firmly a two-way street. In an episode built around audience participation, Kurup teaches his listeners how to pronounce his father's name, “Karipott Thaivalipill Ravindran Kurup”; his mother's name, “Leela Bhavani Ravindran”; and his own, “Shishir Ravindran Kurup.” “All well and good until you move to another country,” says Kurup, commenting on his audience's difficulty in pronouncing these Indian names. He pulls out an old high school yearbook, in which his schoolmates scribbled all kinds of nicknames for him. Shishir Kurup became “Shish, C.C.,…. Hosh Hosh, Sheer Energy, My favorite little nigger … and Shitsmear Karap.”

To me, Kurup offers a most engaging lesson on assimilation in a song. Trumping his guitar and practicing what I might call his “reverse heteronography,” Kurup provides a taxonomy of the class he calls “white guys”: from a heterosexual, pie-eating, politically correct poet to a melancholy atheist devoted to the Green cause to a middle-class Freudian suffering from the Oedipus complex to a postcolonial liberal who quietly dreads the multicultural revolution to a government employee who “books first-class passage on the good ship White Flight,” so as to “save miscegenation for another sunny day.” Seen from a black and a brown eye, the song implies, “white” is not a noncolor, but the very color of otherness.

Coda by Fable

On a bright, sunny day Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari conceive of the notion of “minor literature” for their reading of Franz Kafka's work. “A minor literature doesn't come from a minor language; it is rather that which a minority constructs within a major language,” they argue, citing Kafka'sendeavor of writing in German as a Prague Jew, an ethnicity/race considered simultaneously part of the German minority population inside the Czech territory and excluded from it. Choosing to write in a language that is not his own, Kafka works toward “the possibility of setting up a minor practice of major language from within,” creating his own patois by swelling his deterritorialized German with symbolism, esoteric allusions, and hidden signifiers. What

Kafka has done to the German language in Czechoslovakia, Deleuze and Guattari observe, may be compared to what African Americans are able to do with the English language.

“Create the opposite dream: know how to create a becoming-minor,” exclaim Deleuze and Guattari, whose enthusiasm for the minor literature is hardly disguised by the sober, intricate, and intense style of their writing. I find their concept of the “minor literature” extremely suggestive for my reading of self performance. In translation: self performances by other subjects have created a minor theater within performance art, a minor intermedia genre within
the autobiographical literature, and a minor dream—an opposite dream—within the American dream.

As one who inhabits the hetero-locus, I share Deleuze and Guattari's zest for becoming-minor. But I would push their concept further to hold that becoming minor is never free from the possibility of becoming major. Since the state of becoming exists in a flux of ever-shifting intensities, becoming one is also en route to becoming two, becoming three, and becoming a multitude. In the fluctuating chain of becoming, becoming the self is to anticipate becoming the other, and becoming the other is to be thrust into becoming the self yet again. “I is an other,” as Arthur Rimbaud puts it. The boundary between different becomings is porous and elastic. Opposites merge, collapse, and never reach the definite form of becoming solid and immobile. A minor literature is then caught in the probability of becoming a major literature. The marginal may become central and the central may become hardly discernible from the peripheral. Thus, what Deleuze and Guattari call “the opposite dream” is just as hard to reach as the frontal dream, the oblique dream, the concave dream, the square dream, the virtual dream, the zebra dream, or the American dream. Precisely because these dreams constantly risk becoming their others, I think, the act of dreaming is ever-indeterminate, often titillating, and coextensive with the labor of discovering, cultivating, and fabricating the self who dreams. Performing the self is, in the reversed course, an act of dreaming and a labor of becoming. To witness a self performance is then to share a dream and to participate in a becoming.

When a dream is shared, it expands and contracts into a waterfall of dreams. When a dream travels, it gallops with a simulacrum of becoming waterfalls and threatens to turn all creatures capable of dreaming into water creatures. Thus, a lotus grows in the middle of a desert, a lizard sings the whale-aria, and a human infant reverses the evolutionary track to become a fish—with electronically enhanced gills. “To know to know is to love you so. Fish,” as I remember Gertrude Stein rhyming in *Four Saints in Three Acts*. Would it be too arid of me to suggest that to become the self in performing the self is also to become a very odd fish who breathes with a pair of actual lungs? And to become an odd fish is also to reverse the evolutionary track in Stein's verse to become the beloved—the you being loved by me, the self being loved by others, the other being loved by other selves. Home is where the fish dreams.

To become a fable, then, at a discursive site devoted to self performance, I offer a lost dream from my hetero-locus as the moral of this moment, one that we have consumed together. I talk in my dream; I dream when I talk, remembering a minor gospel according to the dinosaurs:

Once upon a time, there were dinosaurs, who roamed the Earth as giants. They ate everything, from vegetation, to butterflies, to mineral deposits in the hard rocks, to their own babies. They battled each other for sport. They wrestled with the pre-Olympian Titans. They threatened to dinosaurize the million futures of the terrestrial races.

One day, a most violent dinosaur uncle caught a little anonymous germ. He ha-chooed, and lost his unicorn. He coughed, and lost a hundred pounds of dinosaur blood. He blinked and went blind. He stumbled and became paralyzed.

The dying dinosaur uncle was visited by his ignorant neighbor for a game of Monopoly. And the neighbor paid a price for his easy victory. He lost his precious heart, but not before he had
inflicted his purple sorrow on his hunting partner, a grand-looking, mustached dinosaur, who in turn spread his plague of lost heart through the entire dinosaur village.

Before the sun shone the second day, the Earth was covered by the decomposing bodies of giant dinosaurs, whose skulls displayed the most intricate designs of native intelligence and acquired cerebral guile.

No sensible scientist had noticed the combination of cunning, tenacity, and inconstancy found in the culprit germ's tiny teeth inordinately lethal.

So the germ survived from a vacuity of scientific interest and managed to re-engender myriad of colorful tiny species over the watery Globe.

Well, that is, until the blue horses came, bringing a thousand blue tales …[89]


6. What's in a Name?

Marking Sacred Naked Nature Girls
Naming the Identity

In a narrative about their company history, the Sacred Naked Nature Girls, four women artists who have formed a triracial and multiethnic ensemble in L.A., describe an incident that may endure as the mythic origin of their collaboration: “The women officially christened their group one morning at Zuma Beach, CA, when they spontaneously shed their clothes during an improvisation at the water's edge.”[1] The artists frame the incident as the primal scene for their ensemble. Suddenly, as if by magic, their individual bodies were reborn into one mobile, sentient, and tactile organism named Sacred Naked Nature Girls (fig. 30).

All elements in this openly embellished account of the artistic team's genesis feed into a well-designed nativity ritual. The birthing takes place in a natural surrounding—“at the water's edge,” a liminal space between water and earth, between a moist environment and the loose flesh of sand. The line that tortuously delineates “the edge” stretches like an umbilical cord. The throes of reproductive labor assume a dramatic ease; they are pleasures from improvised movements. The artists who are at once their own mothers and daughters select a most “spontaneous” costume for their collective body: “Naked Came I Out of My Mother's Womb.”[2] After birth comes the christening: the

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birth of a name. The women act as midwives to deliver their nominal quadruplets: Sacred Naked Nature Girls, a name composed of four words, four loaded concepts, four refashioned and conjoined signifiers that anticipate new significations. Here, the women might have culled another phrase from the Bible as their culminating chant: “My name is Legion: for we are many.”[3]

The four artists who name themselves Sacred Naked Nature Girls (SNNG) come from diverse ethnic and artistic backgrounds: Danielle Brazell, an ex-Catholic, third-generation Irish Polish American artist who is the artistic director at Highways and teaches performance workshops for women there; Laura Meyers, a Polish Catholic/Russian Jewish American body artist who has studied with Leo Shapiro and John Malpede and has collaborated with dancer/choreographer Oguri's company Renzoku; Akilah Oliver, an African American poet, teacher, and performance artist who at one time worked with the Los Angeles Poverty Department led by Malpede; and Denise Uyehara, a Japanese American solo performer and writer whose play Hiro has been produced by various regional theaters.[4] The artists' cultural diversity is further compounded by their diverse sexualities (homosexual, heterosexual, and bisexual). The four performing together thus amass the interests of intersecting audience communities. Their usual spectators include artists, gays, lesbians, bisexuals, HIV-positive people, Caucasian American, Asian American, and African American men and women. Some women's groups have strongly supported their work; some men have attended their performances for reasons other than artistic interest.

The Sacred Naked Nature Girls internationally toured their first piece, Untitled Flesh, an all-nude performance, initially presented in Boulder, Colorado, in April 1994. Their second piece, Home. The Last Place I Ran to Just about Killed Me, premiered at Highways in August 1996. SNNG presented its third piece, The Party—which the ensemble cocreated with an outside director, Elia Arce—for five evenings in October 1997, also at Highways.[5]

Although the three pieces deal with different issues of sexuality, ethnicity, identity, and culture, they share a common feminist foundation. The first two feature the multifaceted experiences of women in society as their themes. The third is autobiographical, built on
SNNG members' relationships as artists and women working together in an ensemble for five years. Infused with a self-reflexive honesty, this piece exposes many of the difficulties confronting the women as artistic colleagues, and it heralded their joint decision for SNNG to go into hiatus, so members could pursue their individual goals. With all three pieces, the company designated at least one show during each tour exclusively for an audience of women. SNNG also offered workshops that included women from diverse social, ethnic, and economic strata. This commitment to empowering women demonstrates the ensemble's proactive feminism.

If gender politics has motivated SNNG's company praxis, then racial politics embodied by the collective's multicultural makeup inspires its most conscientious experiment. A dialectic tension between unity and diversity characterizes the group's spirit and ethos. Both in their work and in the ways they represent their work in interviews, publicity materials, and postshow discussions, SNNG repeatedly stresses the differences and commonalities among individual members. This double emphasis on disparity and collectivity is evident in the wide range of labels they use to identify their group: they are “Sacred Naked Nature Girls,” or, in its various shortened forms, “Sacred Nature Girls,” “Sacred Girls,” “Nature Girls,” and so on; they also call their company by its four-letter acronym, SNNG. As a writer, I am confronted with an interesting linguistic problem: references to the Sacred Naked Nature Girls or the Girls seem to demand a plural verb, but SNNG, the collective, calls for a singular verb. The Girls have succeeded in signifying their work's complex dialectics even in the act of naming.

In their “Company History” the Girls emphasize the interplay between unification and diversification:

The Sacred Naked Nature Girls develop their performances through intense collaboration. Each member contributes to the group's artistic vision, rehearsal process, technical and administrative production. Each brings to the group a rich background in performance, improvisation, theater, movement, and visual art. It is this range of experience that directly informs the company's evolution as an ensemble. In addition to their work with SNNG, the members work as individual artists and with other groups.

The paragraph highlights collaboration as SNNG's principal creative method, which implies the process of sharing, negotiating, and weaving together the participants' differences in order to present an integrated project. The aesthetic unity achieved through such collaboration, moreover, depends on each member's generous and more or less equivalent contributions to each aspect of an artistic production. The potential success of their collaboration, however, is strengthened, if not guaranteed, by the rich variety in their artistic training. Adding to this variety is the biographical fact that the four members are multiethnic, multicultural, and, in experience and practice, of multiple sexualities. Finally—almost an afterthought—the paragraph introduces a detail about the company's flexible formation: each member also works independently and with other groups.

The apparent afterthought bears further contemplation. Though it may not have been intended as a statement defining SNNG's philosophy, it does suggest a method of organization inspired by the Girls' insistence on diversity. This organizational method both accounts for and corresponds to the fluidity of identities and the overlapping of community affiliations that an
individual artist must confront at the turn of the millennium. In other words, the Girls were drawn to forming SNNG because they wished to rally around a certain set of conceptual and performative issues. Since “diversity” is one of these issues, it is desirable for them to maintain, even to maximize, the plurality among themselves. Affirming that their differences ensure the continuous growth of SNNG’s art, they encourage members to pursue individual autonomy (to work as “individual artists”) and other affiliations (to collaborate “with other groups”). The task for SNNG then lies in nurturing its members’ diversification as a strength and in recognizing their constant needs to digest and synthesize this diversification.

To the extent that the Girls' art reflects their own time and place, the group's fluid organization responds to the contingent requirements of their artistic site. Their model of permissive sorority at once mirrors and problematizes the complexity of L.A. culture, one characterized by its aesthetic hybridity, multiple agencies, and parallel constituencies: a culture of cultures. On a microcosmic scale, SNNG offers a working method for L.A. It has made an art out of investigating how to mediate and administer its members' differences. It attempts to express rather than suppress the potential conflicts caused by its artistic citizens' irreducible variance. As a city that struggles to handle its conglomerate of distinct cultures, L.A. may do well to heed SNNG's attitude by cultivating its multiethnic citizenship as a strength.

Based in L.A., the Girls entered a laboratory of multicultural ecology hoping to cultivate a habitat for their communal vision. What was at stake was much more than the particular aesthetic appeal and political relevance of their alternative enterprise. SNNG also had to invent an economic strategy that would ensure the group's survival in a city marked by the Hollywood hegemony. Encouraging the Girls to work both within and without SNNG proved a viable strategy for the ensemble. In fact, the Girls were increasingly receiving foundation grants and critical attention when, in 1997, they ironically decided to suspend their collaboration. In any case, SNNG proved to be a significant group not only in its mining of provocative issues, but also in its management of financial and personnel resources to maintain the miners. Their art is in this respect a luminous specimen from the L.A. cultural underground.

With a specific multicultural slant, SNNG's redressive/feminist art straddles diverse aesthetic fields and cognitive modes. The Sacred Girls have deliberately placed their art in the liminal zone of porous boundaries and chimerical desires. Theirs is an aesthetic of reference, drawing freely from a globe of cultural allusions, most of which are derived from mixed sources. Their hybrid and multivalent art demonstrates a postmodern performance condition articulated by Philip Auslander, who holds that there is no longer any rarefied boundary between cultural categories. Accordingly, “differences between ‘marginal’

and avant-gardistic cultural discourses and mass-cultural or commodified discourses are differences of degree and context, not ineluctable differences of form or even content.”[6]

SNNG takes advantage of this saturated state of cultural practices and draws its artistic materials from every available source. The group adheres to a politics of eclectic multiplicity as an aesthetic cause. This all-encompassing principle sometimes serves to create performance segments rich in sensory appeal and complex in conceptual content. There are times, however, when this eclecticism could benefit from judicious editing. Occasionally, in their ardor to practice inclusiveness, they have allowed predictable episodes to stand
alongside ones that actually disrupt critical inertia. Their politics, on these occasions, detracts from their artistic economy.

To me, the greatest mystery of SNNG's art circulates around the four words that evoke its members' many names: Sacred—Naked—Nature—Girls. The multiple workings of the ensemble's aesthetic modes, theoretical concerns, ideological positions, and performance methods are gingerly embodied by the multiple linkages of their nominal signs. As the three qualifiers become variously joined to the basic subject—“Girls,” the divergent issues raised by the four artists come to overlap, complement, evade, and contradict one another, as if these symbolic signifiers have emerged as multifaceted characters in an intricate drama. This chapter tells the story of the four Girls' multiple names, emulating the theatrical grace of their performative reiterations of self-naming.

**Voice and Sight**

Naming as an act of explication offers a theoretical angle with which to view SNNG's work. Yet even more crucial is the generative function that it serves for the group. I return to the “primal scene” constructed by the Sacred Girls as the ceremony that both celebrates their union and defines their collaboration. My reading posits that the artists are reborn in their union into one flesh and their collaboration formally begins with the birth of their ensemble name. The scene therefore involves a double birth. The initial birth envisions the artists' intent to collaborate as one body/unit when they disrobe in front of one another, symbolically ripping off the boundaries that prevent their union. Witnessed by one another and by the surrounding landscape, their union now exists as a novel sight—an assemblage of figures made of many colors—but the sight remains anonymous. Without a name that declares their emotional and spatial relationships to one another and to the world, the sight of their union yields no special meaning; it is ontologically indistinguishable from any other sight, whether of animate or inanimate objects, that happens to occupy their present field of vision. Their union, for lack of a proclaimable identity, is at this instant continuous with the visible natural milieu, possessing no autonomous status. To acquire a sense of independence for their artistic matrimony/nativity the artists must match their physical visibility with linguistic visibility; they have to annul their anonymity to announce their union. Only through naming can their collaboration as SNNG begin to claim its being, identify its image, and pronounce its entrance into the Symbolic order, one maintained by textual memories.

Naming as a performative action coordinates SNNG's self-enacted memory of its own advent; it is a performance that consists of giving voice to a hitherto silent sight. The artists represent their self-naming as a christening ceremony, yet they baptize themselves solely by the sanctity of their joint agency. Their rite of naming appropriates and modifies both pagan and Christian motifs, simulating the hallowed gesture of creativity in a setting brimming over with hints of animistic spirits. They evoke the vision of a coven of witches, partaking of sacraments in high tides, holding communion with the teeming cosmos. SNNG, their newly found body/identity, emerges like a many-headed Hydra who has evolved the ability to split its monstrous body into four separate bodies that move in adjacent, contiguous, or intersecting spheres. The moving bodies, when they so desire, re-merge into one. An anachronistic tonality of earnestness characterizes these pantheistic visions. As if dancing a tango between floating and plunging, the artists seem to have de-gravitated away from the weight of fin-de-siècle cynicism but simultaneously remained rooted against the levity of postmodernist parody.
Just as earnestness is defined by the agreement between surface and interior, the Sacred Girls approach the Christian thematics they mis-quote with a similar level of piety that sustains belief. SNNG's modulation of the Christian theology centers around the power of naming. The Christian God enunciates Himself as the Word in the Image of the Trinity, thereby linking the (speech) act of naming with creating. His word renders visible the myriad sights that populate the earth; His voice coincides with the created sight. As a wellestablished, almighty Subject, the Christian God owns the font of originality, buttressed by His scripturally ordained omniscience, omnipotence, and omnipresence. Read against this context, the performative naming employed by the Sacred Girls is strictly an act of re-creation. Their union first registers as a sight—as it were—on the tablet of Nature, before they find words to name it. Their voice articulates the significance of their collective being as sight: their voice reinforces the sight, but it neither precedes nor coincides with the sight. Regarded as marginalized, hence anomalous subjects within the Judeo Christian patriarchal structure, the Sacred Girls cannot possibly claim “the font of originality” reserved for the long-standing authoritative Father. What

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they can do instead is intervene, inserting their presence as visual information onto the premises of the powers that be and, by sheer insistence, inscribing/naming their own versions of truth in the Holy Book.

So goes SNNG's performance score: Sight. Voice. Text. Then perhaps the harvesting of anticipated yields: Recognition. Power. History. The force of such a score is primarily self-confirmed, validated by a community of viewers who temporarily congregate because of shared beliefs. The Sacred Girls are sacred first of all to one another; they constitute their own basic witnessing community. Their community has the potential to expand as they offer performances to other spectators, who may or may not experience the gracious violence of conversion. The spectators who gather to form nomadic communities for the Sacred Girls could extend or withhold their beliefs in the performance, contingent upon the degree to which they respond to the promise of the SNNG “salvation.”

As they borrow the magic of naming as a point of inception for their ensemble, so the Sacred Girls assume the biblical model for spiritual efficacy in conceptualizing their potential public appeal. What I've extracted from their self-witnessed ritual of naming as their performance score and anticipated yields follows the theological design for religious conversion and confirmation of faith/belief: manifestation of miracles (sight), dissemination of gospel (voice/text), bearing witness (recognition), holding communion with fellow believers (power), reiterated affirmation of believed “Truth” (history). The artists nevertheless depart radically from the orthodox code of conduct that governs both sight and voice in the Bible. They critique the theological formation of Christianity by exercising a feminist exegesis of Scripture. Their exegesis proceeds with two interpretive strategies: literalization of metaphors and inversion of values. They take to task, in particular, the gender-specific metaphors the Bible uses to convey heavenly/spiritual matters in worldly/sexual terms.

The Christian Scripture narrativizes the relationship between God and man as that between man and woman; the metaphors of sexual difference establish a hierarchy of spiritual difference. A parable from the Book of Ezekiel expresses this sexual/spiritual hierarchy in no uncertain terms. The parable compares Jerusalem to an exposed infant girl. The Lord takes pity on her, washes off her blood, raises her up to become a jewel. As her breasts are formed and her hair grows, the Lord sees that she is “old enough for love” (Ezekiel 16.8). He covers her nakedness with His garment and makes her His wife. But, prideful of her own beauty, the
wife willingly becomes “a prostitute,” sharing her body promiscuously with other lovers. The Lord condemns His adulterous wife:

Therefore, you prostitute, hear the word of the Lord! This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Because you poured out your wealth and exposed your nakedness

in your promiscuity with your lovers, and because of your detestable idols… therefore I am going to gather all your lovers, with whom you found pleasure, those you loved as well as those you hated. I will gather them against you from all around and will strip you in front of them, and they will see all your nakedness. I will sentence you to the punishment of women who commit adultery… I will bring upon you the blood vengeance of my wrath and jealous anger. Then I will hand you over to your lovers… They will strip you of your clothes and take your fine jewelry and leave you naked and bare. (Ezekiel 16.35–39)

The naked female body is the pivotal image in this parable. The thematic connotations of this image, like the scarlet letter “A” dangling from Hester Prynne's neck in Hawthorne's novel, change through time and circumstances. The deserted baby girl's nakedness indicates vulnerability; it bears the sign of parental neglect and social disdain. The nakedness of a woman “old enough for love” might suggest the maturity and allure of her virgin body, the proof of her eligibility for matrimony and for biblical knowledge. Made wife, the woman takes pleasure at her own body and shares her naked beauty with other lovers; she violates her vow to be in eternal possession by the one Lord who was first her adopted Father, then her true/legitimate Husband. Her “sin” of adultery arises from her re-possession of her naked body as her own. Consequently, the Lord punishes her by turning her nakedness into her shame, a sign of her dis-possession: she is stripped bare and stripped of all the rewards for her gratitude and fidelity to the Lord.

The woman, almost identical to her naked body, is perceived by the Lord as an object or a sign throughout the parable. Her image remains visible to her Watcher, but her voice is not heard. In contrast, the Lord shields His body in “garment” and exerts His presence primarily as a narrative voice. The woman, a sight without a voice, is under constant surveillance by the narrative voice. The narrative voice establishes its power not only by representing the Author, but also by its freedom from being watched; its authority increases when it pronounces the Author's jealous will to punish His adulterous subordinate. But how does the woman begin to sin? She “sins” the minute she collapses her subjective will with her own body object; she decides to “become a prostitute,” exposing her nakedness in promiscuity. In the eyes of the Lord, the woman has sinned because she has infused the sight of her body with her own determination. The invisible markings of the woman's will on her own body animate her in erotic actions. Her actions, be they motivated by pride or pleasure, are then the physical manifestations of her voice. She has given a voice to her naked body as sight.

Inverting the terms of this parable brings us back to the moment when

four women artists “spontaneously shed their clothes” and name themselves Sacred Naked Nature Girls. The parable uses “nakedness” as a metaphor for the condition of human original sin. The Naked Girls, however, take nakedness literally as being unclothed. In their first piece, Untitled Flesh, the artists turn nakedness into a performance condition, confronting its pejorative connotations to examine its complexity. The sight of the naked female body recurs as a visual subtext in the performance concepts listed by the Girls: “multiple layers of
nakedness,” “flesh memory,” “the construction and appropriation of desire,” “the mythos of cultural identification,” “the gaze,” “power,” “erotica and pornography,” “magic, class, sexuality, and performance as a transformative process.”[8] SNNG's work then inspects the social, mythical, or historical traces left on, remembered, or appropriated by the female bodies on display. Inmaking public their nakedness, the Naked Girls have rendered their own bodies “promiscuous.” The crux of their investigation therefore lies in provoking the spectators' self-conscious responses to their own viewing of the “impure” bodies in performance.

What most fascinates me about the Girls' naked actions is that they are performed in a collective of women of diverse racial and ethnic origins and multiple sexual orientations. In other words, I perceive their bodies as uncompromisingly different from one another because of both visible and in visible markings. No matter how partial and deceptive my perceptions are, I discern their divergences as both skin-deep and hidden in libidinal compulsions barred from my sight. The Sacred Nature Girls' performances consciously take stock of their acknowledged differences, making the dynamics between their unity and disparity a conceptual and performative issue. Tome, SNNG's collective art, at least during the duration of the performance, presents the actual image of a utopian dream, a glimpse of a possible global ethos advocating forbearance for differences. Their feminist, multicultural coalition promises me—an anomalous subject myself, a foreign-born Asian female immigrant—a politics of marginality, a force of anomalous identification that may disrupt the Anglo-American, phallocentric status quo.

Notably, the politics of marginality exercised bySNNG is invested in what Peggy Phelan terms “an ideology of the visible,” tackling a question raised by Amelia Jones and Andrew Stephenson in their anthology Performing the Body/Performing the Text: whether becoming (in)visible in performance can lead to liberation.[9] I shall bracket this question for the moment to consider the most obvious effect of women self-producing “promiscuous” sights and sounds in front of a congregated crowd.

From the media-milked case of Karen Finley, whose 1989 piece We Keep Our Victims Ready was involved in the National Endowment of the Arts censorship furor, we know that a solitary woman's disrobed figure engaged in public
action can still be seen by a large segment of population as transgressive — that is, as working against “appropriate” gender behavior. How much more so then it is for four women of different colors to protest their love and lust for one another by forming a post-Rodin flesh sculpture of *The Kiss* on stage (fig. 31)! While a single female body displaying herself in performance could be construed as “essentialist” or “universal,” at once reduced and inflated into a stand-in for all women, the less familiar—arguably harder to be contained or recuperated—sight of four female subjects divulging their pain and pleasure in public deflates the myth of universality with their perceived visible and audible specificities. Such an accent on specificity invites the viewers’ attention to the immediate and the localized, compelling them to heed, in Jon Cruz’s terms, “the nuances of flesh-and-blood subjects who must negotiate through sensuous knowledge-making the conditions of everyday life.”

The multiethnic and transgendered particularities among the Girls create a distinct chemistry and a tangle of conundrums that bring home a thorny dilemma confronting the United States: namely, the struggles of disenfranchised subjects to reach “moral solidarity” and obtain intellectual, political, and economic equality. While maintaining feminism as their united front, the Girls identify that “thorny dilemma” as “multiculturalism.” As the artists state, they wonder if there is “a feminist investigation of multiculturalism.” To find an answer, they survey the existence of “psychic, physical, cultural, gender and imagined borders” in search of “a language that does not deny or erase differences.” By creating works together as “people of varying class, cultural, and sexual identities,” the Girls wish to inspiredialogues with and among their diverse audience members. While they emphasize that performance is a shared transformative process between the artists and spectators, they also play up the interactions among the performers themselves. For they endeavor to find how women construct their identities, how their bodies are appropriated or abused, and how they relate to one another as women, be they lesbian, straight, or bisexual. Consequently, the Sacred Naked Nature Girls turn their own bodies into both their experiments and laboratories. They proffer a
visible, audible, tangible, and mobile monument of flesh to render their artistic union an embodiment of multiculturalism. Their case again attests to the conceptual alliance of feminism and multiculturalism that has revitalized contemporary L.A.'s art world.

Marked and Heard

In an attempt to “revalue a belief in subjectivity and identity which is not visibly representable,” Peggy Phelan launches a brilliant critique against “the ideology of the visible” in her 1993 book *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*. Phelan interrogates the ironically similar assumption held by progressives and conservatives alike concerning the equation between representational visibility and political efficacy. Because of a mistaken judgment about “the relation between the real and the representational,” Phelan diagnoses, both groups believe that “greater visibility of the hitherto under-represented leads to enhanced political power.” Thus, progressives promote a greater circulation of visibility for the racial, ethnic, and sexual others in the representational economy, whereas conservatives dedicate themselves to defaming or censoring such a circulation. Phelan maintains that the tactics used by both groups reflect insufficient understanding “of the relationship between visibility, power, identity, and liberation.” “If representational visibility equals power,” Phelan comments wryly, “then almost-naked young white women should be running Western culture. The ubiquity of their image, however, has hardly brought them political or economic power.”

Phelan expresses a strong suspicion of the purported political benefits of increased representational visibility, as illustrated humorously by her example of scantily dressed young white women. Casting her vote for the “real power in remaining unmarked,” Phelan's challenge to the ideology of the visible consists in reversing what she calls “the binary between the power of visibility and the impotence of invisibility.” According to her, visibility is “a trap” because the represented image—the given to be seen—is placed under surveillance and regulation. “In framing more and more images of the hitherto under-represented other, contemporary culture finds a way to name, and thus to arrest and fix, the image of that other,” argues Phelan. She further observes that visibility provokes “voyeurism, fetishism, the colonial/imperial appetite for possession.” Although she grants a certain political leverage in attaining a more inclusive representational landscape, she resists conceding more theoretical virtues to the power of visibility because of undesirable consequences.

Phelan's caution against an overinvestment in the merits of obtaining visibility is highly compelling. As the parable from the Book of Ezekiel demonstrates, the woman is quite visible as an image, but she enjoys neither freedom nor power. Instead, she is confined by the constant vigil of her Keeper. Conversely, the Lord's almighty power is hardly abated by affirming his presence primarily as a voice. Voice, rather than sight, then, is the key element in defining who has the real power in this parable. Voice conveys the ability to empower and authenticate the truth effects of sight. This crucial linkage between voice and sight indicates a limit to Phelan's conception of the unmarked, “a configuration of subjectivity” that secures the subject's power and freedom by evading being sighted. The problem with Phelan's politics of invisibility is that there is often no distinction between her tactic of “active vanishing” and the actual result expressed by the truism: out of sight, out of mind. It is also hard to distinguish the subliminal policy of invisibility administered by the dominant culture to absent its “abnormal” members from the invisibility politics adopted by the “abnormal” members to induce the implosion of the dominant culture. It is unfortunate but likely that the ideology of
the invisible will result in the erasure of “abnormality” from the privileged norm. As a sight unseen and a voice unheard, the abnormal/anomalous subject will then become a negligible deposit conveniently kept on the margin as a lost memory, lost to the norm—out of seeing, out of hearing, out of mind!

I suggest that presence (defined as representational visibility and audibility) still offers more possibility than absence (secured by representational invisibility) for the subject to achieve momentary liberation and to exercise individual will. As other subjects, we must reclaim the corporeal attributes of presence. Michele Wallace observes in Invisibility Blues that “black women are more often visualised in mainstream American culture—most prominently as fashion models or as performers in music videos—than they are allowed to speak their own words.” Hence, black women suffer from the problem of “high visibility, ” a problem aggravated by their “total lack of voice. ”[17] Put otherwise, black women are unable to make their presence felt because their existence in vision does not ensure the coexistence of their voice. The best way for these

overvisualized but mostly muted individuals to redress this problem, I believe, is not voluntarily to disappear from view but to become a speaking sight.

While there is no direct connection between representational visibility and political power, there is at best a dubious correlation between invisibility and freedom; the link is even more precarious between invisibility and power. Visibility may be turned into a surveillance mechanism by the Establishment to enforce control over anomalous subjects, who are “undesirable elements” in relation to mainstream culture. Allowing oneself to be watched indeed subjects one to the disadvantage of being scrutinized, co-opted, and misread. But these drawbacks might be the price that disenfranchised subjects have to pay in order to contest, even to upend, the norm of their invisibility. From the perspective of the always already invisible, the risks entailed by the exposure under the light might offer more room for self-determination than the freedom of movement in the dark; privacy publicized is a sacrifice to a projected and desired, if uncertain, end. This is the reasoning that makes the sight of four nude women of different skin colors, body sizes, and physiognomic features moving and talking together on stage such a liberating presence to my eyes and ears. As an interpreter who consumes SNNG's art for my textual performance, I have named, framed, and transfixed as if on a memorywall SNNG's naming rite as the ensemble's discursive genesis. To name is to mark; to be named is to be remarked; to name again is to ensure—if provisionally—that the originary naming is heard. The Sacred Naked Nature Girls have named themselves in order to mark their new presence. I exert the verbal violence of renaming their name in the service of my performing words, but I do so also to extend a paper stage for their name to live, sing, and dance. Have I empowered myself as critic or empowered the subject of my critical gaze and hearing? Or perhaps I and my artists and you, our reader, have simply consented to our imaginary conspiracy so as to mark the exchange of our representational currencies.

There is admittedly an uncertain correspondence between the power of self-generated naming and publicly elected political power; the former is performative while the latter is legislative. But I question whether such incommensurability between performative and political power is a difference in kind or in degree. Performative power lasts for the duration of its witnessed enactment. It may or may not have a lasting impact on the performer and the spectator. But does political power last forever? I suspect great uncertainty even for spiritual power's hold on eternity, although spiritual engagement allegedly occupies a deeper space—the event horizon—in the human psyche: the Law of the Father may be challenged or grow infirm yet.
Consider the opening tableau from *Untitled Flesh*. In the beginning there are random sounds in the dark. The sounds progress gradually in accelerated intervals, thumping out a rhythm like a fist hitting a sandbag. The sudden intrusion of an on-again, off-again strobelight fleshes out the phantom sounds with illuminated parts of female bodies. A litany of repeated questions bursts from the now-ruptured darkness: “I am falling,” announces a woman's voice. Another quickly replies, “I'll catch you.” “I'm falling.” “I've got you.” Bluish strobe flashes disclose the sources of these refrains: a carousel of naked flesh made of three women with outstretched arms, cradling a woman who keeps falling in their midst. As often as the refrains warn of her falling, the freefalling woman is caught in the safety net formed by her companions' magnanimous bodies.

A woman cries out a varied motif: “She said, ‘I'm falling. Will you catch me?’ ” The cry leads to a chorus of catechism that tests the boundary of unconditional love, confirmed by the voice, “Yes, I'll catch you.” The reassurances seem to urge the falling woman not to stop falling. The velocity of her falls is matched only by the degree of her physical abandon and the certainty of her being caught in midair by some woman's bosom as their naked bodies clash. This performance segment ends, ironically, when the spinning body crashes to the floor: a heavy date with gravity. Does it suggest abandonment, accident, or death?

The ambiguity of this last suspense, however, cannot neutralize the tremendous tenderness released in the segment. Significantly, the Girls have chosen this paradigmatic scene to announce their emotional engagements as women in their first public appearance. Their acrobatics of love therefore establishes the basic tone of their performance, mapping out an autonomous realm of female desire independent of male presence.

“Sexuality,” as Jill Dolan observes, “is a tangible currency in the representational exchange.” Sexuality in its manifold manifestations, especially when it involves *female bodies*, is a priority in SNNG's representational system, the top item on its performance to-do list. “While it is crucial not to conflate sexuality with gender,” Dolan continues, “expressions of sexuality further illustrate the operation of gender codes and constructs in the representation of the female body.”[18] SNNG extends Dolan's insight to embody the complex interplay between sexualities and gender roles with their all-nude but plainly different female bodies. The Girls show off their fleshy, colored torsos, adorned with birthing scars, stretch marks, some tattoos, and traces of aging. By simply exposing themselves, the artists make no comment on the “constructedness” associated with popular images of the “female body.” The sight of their corporeal peculiarities, however, constructs more possibilities for the inventory of gender and sexual representations. For they exhibit sights and voices of women that subvert the norms produced, endorsed, and commodified by commercial idealization. Their nude performance controverts the

“most wanted” models of “female body,” who are predominantly white, young, thin, smooth, well proportioned, and alluringly positioned—Phelan's “almost naked, young white women.” (By the way, these ubiquitous models of “beauty” may not have political power, yet by virtue of their commodifiability, some do possess immense economic—not to mention sexual—power.)

It is worth noting that the Girls engage in this task of diversifying the representations of “femaleness” by interacting among themselves as diverse females. They propose “sexuality”
or “eroticism” as an important aspect of female relationships, but they want also to include other possibilities. The Girls posit their unconditional trust for one another—demonstrated by the image of a woman's unconstrained falling and the choral refrains, “I'll catch you”—as the principal support of their artistic union. By extension, their collaborative art pursues an all-embracing sisterhood. The amorous tension ignited by flesh contact, nonetheless, complicates and diversifies what Susan Gubar has analyzed as “the monolithic ideal of sisterhood.”[19] Instead, the scene casts a wide net of female liaisons that espouse lesbian sexuality without precluding other permutations of bonding among women.

Marked, Remarked, but Untitled

Although Phelan is “carefully blind” to the limitations of invisibility and to the inadequacy of any dualistic schema (visibility vs. invisibility),[20] her privileging of the force of the unmarked in identity formation is seductive. Phelan's argument persuades because it highlights the negatives in our self-produced films of subjectivity. For in the terrain where my identity forms, the invisible conditions the visible. The invisible engine of my psyche propels me to tilt my head when I think without my knowing why. Fragments of my subjectivity might have coalesced into a namable mass from the angle of my tilted head without me ever noticing such etiologic episodes. Oras Phelan expresses it, “Identity emerges in the failure of the body to express being fully and the failure of the signifier to convey meaning exactly.”[21] Phelan cites Adrian Piper's performance of the problematics of “race” to exemplify the arbitrary relation between the body's visible markings and the self's choice of identity. A visual artist and philosopher, Piper identifies herself as an African American, but she has pale skin and could “pass as white.” In her 1989 performance piece Cornered, Piper proposes her individual “racial” situation as a common scenario for her spectators, given the history of enforced or voluntary miscegenation resulting from the trauma of slavery in the United States. Piper unmoors the fixity of racial identification from the visible signifier of skin color. She asks her “white” spectators who happen to carry ancestral “black” genes if they would identify themselves as “black” or “white.”

In Phelan's analysis, Cornered demonstrates the unreliability of visible body features in grounding one's choice and perceptions of self-identity. For Phelan, Piper's question to her spectators exposes the relativity of racial designations: “The same physical features of a person's body may be read as ‘black’ in England, ‘white’ in Haiti, ‘colored’ in South Africa, and ‘mulatto’ in Brazil.” Since the link is entirely artificial between the signifier for racial identification (that is, physical markings) and its signified cross-culturally, Phelan deconstructs the myth of skin color intrinsic to the dominant ideology of race. As she states, “Race-identity involves recognizing something other than skin and physical inscriptions. One cannot simply ‘read’ race as skin-color.”[22]

I am in sympathy with Phelan's analysis; nevertheless, I find an aporia in her rejection of the probable, if partial, visual foundation that informs racial identification and rationalizes the ideology of race. The aporia comes from the basis of Phelan's critique against racialization: Adrian Piper's Cornered. The major crisis of meaning established by Piper's performance of identity involves a corporeal detail particular to the artist herself: Piper can “pass as white.” That is to say, Piper has barely discernible skin pigment (and physiognomic features) that would mark her as nonwhite; this visual factor contributes to her particular dilemma and to the privilege that she explores as her performance theme. Therefore, it is actually a superficial physiological trait—the skin color nearwhite or white—that enables Piper and, for that matter,
Phelan to begin contemplating the artificiality of racial designation. Although I join Phelan and Piper in their protest against the simplistic equation between race and skin color, I wish to stress that skin color does register as visual information and carries social and psychic consequences. As the color white is naturalized to be the norm in this society, Piper is “liberated” by her pale skin color to become unmarked, thereby enjoying the freedom to intervene from within her ostensible position of privilege. If she wants to, Piper can choose “to pass as white.”

I ask, then, what kind of freedom or self-agency can I enjoy if, in contrast to Piper, I happen to have a visibly nonwhite skin color? What questions should I raise if I take pride in an opposite privilege from Piper’s: a beautiful and readily discernible nonwhite skin color? To ask these questions is not to deny the insights of Phelan’s critique or of Piper’s performance, but to refocus our attention on the corporeal sources of social constructions. For social constructions such as race and gender acquire their truth effects precisely because they enlist our body’s external features as evidence and grounding. Our admittedly incomplete perceptions of the body serve to reinforce the plausibility of those constructed ideas that regulate human typologies. If we desire to induce an implosion of the status quo so as to emancipate the oppressed values and the eclipsed human resources, we would do better not to dismiss the solidity of the Establishment, but to reconceptualize the anima and corpus of that solidity.

In my own partially blind view, there is a perceptible animus working in the solid body of dominant ideologies: the logic of the visible and the abhorrence of incongruous sights. The visual anomalies become harder to digest but also harder to overlook when they are paired with incredible voices. We must, then, acknowledge that, just as the invisible conditions the visible, the visible also guides and thus constricts the invisible. There is, in Michele Wallace’s phrase, “a ‘Harlem’ of the mind.”[23] We could of course pronounce both Harlem and the mind to be fabrications. But we also have the option to join in the fabrication assembly line and to manufacture our own discursive and imagistic cartographies of “Harlem” and “the mind.” Let us note the potential power of the visible as it exists in a continuum with the aural and the textual.[24] To mark the norms, we have to remark and begin remarking on the surface—the plainly to be seen—taking Oscar Wilde’s witty remark about the profundity of surface earnestly.

An all-nude performance enacted by four distinct bodies, SNNG’s Untitled Flesh provides me with a paragon to examine the surfaces of various softtissue containers. But the work’s contribution to my book’s pet ideology—the politics of marginality—does not end with the visible. Untitled Flesh begins with the exposure of the plainly to be seen—the naked skin; the performers frankly champion a return to the body as an art material, brushing elbows with Michelangelo’s paint-dripped sleeves. In their visible diversity, however, the performing women disturb the blank but unified tranquility of the vanishing point and multiply the ideal Renaissance body into “promiscuous” female bodies. By the principle of inclusive multiplicity, absorbing both the positive and negative values, the “promiscuous” artists insist that there is more to the “eye/I”—borrowing from Phelan’s conflation.[25] The Girls’ project of investigating “multiple layers of nakedness” implies that they approach nakedness in various ways: as physiological materiality, historicized nudity, and internalized nakedness. Finding performative expressions for these multiple layers is SNNG’s self-assigned task. The Girls have to scan the visible and render both visible and audible the anatomy of the unheard and invisible.
Archaeology of the Visible

A subsequent scene from *Untitled Flesh*: Four naked women walk freely on a largely bare floor occupied by multiple sites of symbolic and functional objects. There is a wooden ladder on one side, erected upright from a circle of stones and withered leaves. On another side stands an altar covered in black, some barely discernible personal mementos piled on top. Toward the back is a raised area shielded by wire mesh, like a cage. This is an environment subdued in coloration, minimal in its architectural arrangement. Conversely, the

performers and their naked bodies now roaming the space provide the colors, from the shades of their different skin and hair, which comprise a range of mixed pigments irreducible to the uniform black, white, brown, or yellow that we often use to identify race. Observed at close range, these colored masses appear as a lush variety of pinkish white, olive black, pale and bright orange, gold with matte finish, grayish blond, jet black tinged with auburn red. The women's uncovered flesh moving in space displays mobile sculptures, fluid or tensed at various moments, intricate in their carnal plasticity.

Nudity without History

What are the “multiple layers of nakedness” posed by the Girls as a manifesto for SNNG? The first layer of nakedness is nudity without history, nudity without shame. While posing this thesis, I am keenly aware of the wary reactions against public exposure of female bodies raised by some feminist critics. Dolan, for example, disputes the notion that “stripping people to their nude bodies will also strip away the layered cultural constructions of both sexuality and gender.”[26] She identifies “cultural feminism” as the ideological camp that promulgates such a notion and warns against its tendency to universalize the nude female body as an ahistoricized and asexualized specimen of sexual difference. Dolan further points out the similarities between “cultural feminist performance art” and the magazine *Eidos*, a pornographic vehicle aiming at “heterosexual women readers” in their oversights regarding the codedness of visual representations.

I agree with Dolan's caution to note the difficulty in securing the return of the innocent body. I wish, however, to adjust the perspective in her critique. To me, what makes the difference between naive assumption and deliberate reclamation is the women artists' own attitudes toward the use of their unclothed bodies. They can see their bodies as *nude*, thereby alluding to and commenting on the hallowed Western tradition of employing and appropriating the nude female body in male art. This is the tactic adopted by such body artists as Hannah Wilke and Carolee Schneemann, both criticized by Dolan.[27] It is against the grand patriarchal tradition that Wilke's and Schneemann's interventions become significant. By flaunting their own eroticized nude bodies in performances, as *artists and women*, Wilke and Schneemann radically confront the expectations of male erotic art.[28] Their feminist projects make no attempt to elide the ideological codings, which have marked their nude bodies as desirable or deplorable. Rather, they affirm their subjectivity from the simultaneous assertion of feminist self-determination and artistic autonomy. In my view, to judge whether Schneemann and Wilke have “beautiful bodies” in order to legitimize their exposure really misses the point of

their nude performance. In nudity they sneer petulantly, if also seductively, at their Fathers. The sneer and the petulance are their point.
As an alternative, the performance artists could see their uncovered bodies as *naked*, sharing the strategies devised by the Naked Girls. It might be impossible for the Girls to claim that, when stripped, their bodies are seen naked and only naked. They have, however, insisted that there are more than one layers to “nakedness.” With a focus on multiplicity, SNNG's project is one of *reclamation* and *excavation*. Their performing naked is tantamount to a reclamation of their rights as women artists to be seen without clothing in a theatrical context. Such reclamation is concurrently a confrontation with the many problems and controversies aroused by their naked situation, provoking the performers to excavate deeper and deeper layers of their own nakedness.

**NAKED SUBJECTS**

By unveiling their bodies, the Girls make them both stronger and more vulnerable. The strength comes from the subjective wills of the artists, who render their bodies artistic by virtue of their presence as matter in performance. Disrobing entirely takes away the mystique: Yes, they are naked. Sowhat? The initial shock provoked by stimulated sights wears off quickly; the strong women are recognized as the strong naked women, and their show goes on. The vulnerability comes from the dangers of uncontrollable audience responses. The naked women have no protection against spectators who could attack their nakedness for fun or for morality. But the women are subject to such danger even when they are not naked—simply performing or simply walking on the streets. The point is not, then, to avoid danger by not exposing the flesh but to take measures against uninvited sexual violence. Indeed, to contemplate *how* to design such measures is an assignment that the Girls have to contend with when they decide to perform naked. To question *why* that they need to take on such an assignment just because they were born female is the main purpose of their naked performance.

At this juncture, the Girls are experimenting with what I’ve analyzed as the first and the most rudimentary layer of nakedness, shameless and without history. The naked bodies placed in performance are the artists, the paintings, and the canvases. As paintings, the artists mock the reductiveness of racial designations with the complexity of their hues. If their flesh and hair of mixed tints are the truth that claims visual attention, then the black, white, brown, and yellow categories of *Homo sapiens* must be a myth. As canvases, the artists invite the gazing spectators to fantasize about their bodies—with wonder, lust, awe, or surreptitious conscience. But these are canvases equipped with eyes that don't hesitate to gaze back at the gazers. These are canvases that hold paintings—well crafted with revenge schemes: “An eye for an eye,” decrees the Hebrew Bible.

Voyeurism is a game tested by such revenge schemes, recalling one of the dangers of visibility identified by Phelan. Linda Williams in *Hard Core* defines voyeurism as “unauthorized spying, the ability to be everywhere and to see all that is forbidden, hidden.”[29] The Girls, however, not only authorize but expose the spying. They allow no illusionistic screen to stand between the naked spectacles and their implicated watchers. As much as the Naked Girls invite fantasies with unveiled bodies, they also make the fantasizers self-conscious about their fantasy-genic spying. Between the gazers and the performers being gazed upon and gazing back, there is a two-way optical highway, rather than the (stereotypical) cul-de-sac that captures the voyeuristic object. The gazers are made to earn their vicarious pleasure or guilt in their watching by witnessing not only the women's own pleasure but also the enacted erasure of historical traces from their naked—hence "untitled—
flesh. Moreover, they are obligated to receive the women's countergaze. In this state of mutual surveillance, the spectators' voyeuristic license is suspended, if not revoked.

In *Alice Doesn't*, Teresa De Lauretis suggests that concepts such as voyeurism and fetishism “are directly implicated in a discourse which circumscribes woman in the sexual, binds her (in) sexuality, makes her the absolute representation, the phallic scenario.” Under such a patriarchal lens, “woman” is perceived by the presumed male-identified spectator as a sign, “as scene, rather than subject, of sexuality.” She is a lustworthy object in “a drama of vision, a memory spectacle, an image of woman as beauty—desired and untouchable, desired as remembered.” According to this analysis, “woman” as a voyeuristic and fetishistic target is characterized by her lack of subjectivity, lack of selfwilled desire, and lack of material presence. A passive receptacle of the proprietary gaze, she is destined to be a sexual and beautiful spectacle rather than an aggressive spectacle-maker.

Using De Lauretis’s formulation, I argue that the Naked Girls have managed to present a feminist spectacle of transgression that derides the “phallic scenario.” They withhold the colonizing force of male spectatorial desire by making the relationships among themselves their foremost performance condition. They both act and interact as eroticized female subjects. They have *chosen* to utilize their naked flesh as their respective and collaborative art object/substance, basking in its sensorial gratification without the shadow of social taboos. Their highly individualized bodies mock what Brazell dubs the “airbrushed model” of beauty. They have turned their theater into a moving museum, which curates their female bodies as exhibits of corporeal diversity. Since these Naked Girls do not hesitate to view one another as potential companions or sex partners, their performance boldly solicits the interests of female spectators—heterosexual, bisexual, and lesbian alike—who are no longer excluded from the implications of voyeuristic desire. While the performers stare straight into their spectators, they entice, challenge, and interrogate the actions of both the men and the women who stare at them.

**Historicized Nakedness**

Back to the stage of *Untitled Flesh*: Four nude women wander leisurely in the space, surveying their merged territories. They have already domesticated the space with their personal altars. Now they seek to familiarize it with their touch and sight. While they make
the space their home, they also search for home in one another. They appraise each other's opulent bodies with relish and delightful surprise. They laugh, flirt, salute one another, locked in embraces. One woman (Meyers) starts chasing another (Uyehara) as a game. She pursues her until both fall to the ground, their bodies contorted in a violent wrestle. The two other women cheer them on until the wrestlers freeze in a sensual pose.

Another scene: Two games of tug-of-war are played by the four Girls in a circle; their two ropes intersect each other to make a cross. They chat randomly about interracial dating and the gender-or-sex-or-race complex, while the ropes gradually pull all four of them closer to the center (fig. 32). Their wars end with a “group squeeze” and a long kiss between one of the mix-raced couples (Brazell and Oliver). Lights fade out and back in to reveal the four women dancing in a circle, singing a rhyme about the black plague: “Ring around the rosie / A pocket full of posies / Ashes, ashes, we all fall down.” Their dance refers to Henri Matisse's celebrated painting *La Danse* (1909). Its pensive mood, however, contrasts sharply with the bland bliss of *La Danse*. Such atmospheric contrast is enhanced by the different colors and sizes of these performers' bodies. Lights dim when the dancers all drop to the floor, crawling. Their bodies writhe and, as if possessed, they bellow out curses that have been spat at women by human history: “bitch,” “cunt,” “whore,” “lesbian,” “dyke,” “woman,” “you women.”

These performance segments cut into another layer of nakedness: *historized* nakedness. The women's naked bodies are no longer merely materialistic. They share a nakedness marked by the eccentric rage of patriarchal culture and numbed by patronizing male tastes. What makes the situation intriguing, however, is that the Girls have simultaneously and aggressively turned this condition of nudity into a *historicizing* force of nakedness. While they survey the remnants of historical wounds on their bodies, they also salvage the beauty in ruins and seize the momentum to make their own history. For their performance has constructed an autonomous realm to acknowledge and accommodate the multifarious female appetites. By *procreating* a bright room of their own, the Girls reclaim themselves as feminist subjects who desire and are desirable, no matter their color, size, or temperament. Their collaborative actions rewrite the history that privileges male power and write new history that asserts female engagement.

One such history that gets rewritten is the tradition of female nude paintings by male artists. Compare, for example, Pablo Picasso's 1907 painting *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* (fig. 33), depicting a bordello on Avignon Street he visited while a student in Barcelona, with a 1994 publicity photo of the Sacred Naked Nature Girls (fig. 34), which includes Bella Hui, at the time a member of the group. Both images present five female nudes—but what a century of difference between them!

**LES DEMOISELLES D'AVIGNON**

The prostitutes who display their auctionable bodies in Picasso's painting are isolated figures. They direct their somatic charms toward the one who views and paints them, not toward one another. The profile of the figure on the far left suggests an African mask, though a mask without the spirit to enliven it. The figure next to her has an arm bent toward her back, gesturing her compliance. Her other hand pulls up a cloth to partially cover her thigh, so as to tantalize. The next figure to the right shows even less resistance by bending both arms toward the back. The last two figures on the right have
mutilated features. The primitivism of this painting recalls the masculinist assumption that links the female body with the confounding crudity of “nature.”[32] The painted women's faces in *Les Demoiselles* evince no pleasure, no awareness. Devoid of will, they exhibit nothing but the inert flesh of artificial females.

André Salmon suggests that these faces in Picasso's painting are “masks almost entirely freed from humanity” and that these figures are essentially “naked problems, white numbers on the blackboard.” With his conceptualization of *Les Demoiselles*, “Picasso has laid down the principle of the picture-asequation.” [33] Based on Salmon's observation, then, the models/prostitutes captured by Picasso have no need for their extravagant humanity. They are merely “naked problems” that solicit formalistic solutions. According to Gert Schiff, however, for the painter to contrive such solutions is itself “an act of love,” implying the equation between the penis and the paintbrush. [34] I submit that this act of love is simultaneously an act of acquisition and possession. What is manifested by Picasso's painting has nothing to do with each nude figure's sexuality: “Her nakedness is not a function of her sexuality but of the sexuality of those who have access to the picture,” observes John Berger incisively. [35] As a result, the women's erotic availability is predetermined by the male artist-creator for the delectation of the owner-spectator.

Leo Steinberg expresses well the sense of scopophilia seduction characteristic of *Les Demoiselles*: “The surfacing spaces of Cubism are as irrelevant here as the perspectives of academic art. This is an interior space in compression—like the inside of pleated bellows—and the pressure is hitherward, towards the spectator, one arm's length from the proffered fruit.” [36] Steinberg's thesis finds an echo in James R. Mellow's observation regarding the
conflation of two dominant Picasso motifs in *Les Demoiselles*: the harem and the bordello.\[37\]

Put simply, the nudes in Picasso's paintings are odalisques attending to the artist's sexual fancies.

**PORTRAIT FOR SNNG**

The SNNG photo offers a diametrically opposed composition. Admittedly, there are intrinsic difficulties in comparing a painting with a photograph, for they are artifices in different media. Picasso's painting is predicated by its incipient cubist abstraction, as is the SNNG photo by its putative naturalism. Yet both images are products, visual representations, of a conscious authorial design. Both carry legible messages that reflect their relations to the artists and to the viewers; these are decipherable messages regardless of the particularities of their chosen media.

The publicity photo designed by SNNG looks like a snapshot for the transmuted Hydra I described earlier. It/She has a proud and luxuriant body composed of five intermingled bodies of women, who peer at the viewers from their pleasure dome. Their sensuous collision incarnates a state of “flesh jubilation,” to borrow the felicitous phrase of Carolee Schneemann.\[38\] The different ways with which these women perform their gazes, nonetheless, distinguish them from one another, marking them as individuals who can decide how to relate to their viewers. The women's respective singularities are matched by a will-full interplay among themselves as female subjects: Their bodies are volitional entities that have chosen to attach contiguously and intimately to one another. The five women both consent to and enjoy their sentient collision. Such a group portrait graphically embodies the participants'

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34 Promotional photograph of Sacred Naked Nature Girls, 1994, with from top, clockwise: Denise Uyehara, Danielle Brazell, Laura Meyers, Bella Hui, and Akilah Oliver. Photo: Dianne Malley/Helen Garber. Courtesy of SNNG.

intersubjectivity. Thus, with an image declaring their independence and codependency, the Girls announce themselves as a performance collective of strong, gregarious, and self-sufficient women.

**EROTIC ART**

Picasso's *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* falls squarely into the center of Carol Duncan's critique of the aesthetics of power at work in modern erotic art created by male painters. Duncan
argues that “the primary motives of modern erotic art” appear to be “the subjugation of the female will,” an act that turns female distress and victimization into “an explicit condition of male pleasure—the artist's and the viewer's.” She further observes that art-making itself is “analogous to the sexual domination of whores. The metaphor of the penis-as-paintbrush is a revered truth for many twentieth-century artists and art historians.”[39] In other words, when painting the nude damsels-in-distress, Picasso's vision has actually revisited the brothel as a customer who has sought, sized, and found his gratification.

Duncan's feminist reading concurs with Steinberg's nonfeminist analysis of Les Demoiselles. Steinberg locates the revolutionary contribution of Picasso's painting in its break from “the triple spell of tradition—idealization, emotional distance, and fixed-focus perspective—the tradition of high-craft illusionism which conducts the spectator-voyeur unobserved to his privileged seat.” Without idealistic detachment, Les Demoiselles does not profess an “erotic disinterest,” hence making no distinction between “engaged prurience and the contemplation of formal beauty whereby the erotic will to possess was assumed into admiration.” Picasso's painting is, then, made explicitly for its implied male viewer—as Steinberg phrases it, “The observer's presence, any man's presence, is understood without any man being painted in. Everybody can see that the ladies are having company.”[40]

The ladies in the SNNG photo also have company; they are mainly one another's company. Their bodies layered on top of one another enjoy the sensual stimuli of touch. Their blissful union of tactile surfaces resists their viewers' colonizing intent, even as the picture seduces the viewers to join the artists on Cloud Nine. Their hedonism illustrates Luce Irigaray's exclamation, “But woman has sex organs more or less everywhere. She finds pleasure almost anywhere.”[41] While Picasso's viewer is historically understood as heterosexual, European, and male or male-identified, the viewer solicited by the SNNG photo is no longer identified as only male or only Caucasian. The way the Sacred Girls strive to include female spectators and their viewing pleasures in their performance finds an echo in the representational strategy of this publicity photo. As the women shown in the photo have artistic power at their disposal, the female viewers are empowered to fantasize about the artists' and their own sensual delights. The male viewers, on the other hand, can do whatever they desire with the photo. Their actions will have no practical effects on the nude artists who are in control of their photographic demonstration. Indeed, the ultimate distinction between the painting and the photo lies in the artists' control over their artwork: Picasso's ladies are his art objects; the SNNG ladies choose to be their own art objects.

LES DEMOISELLES D/L.A.

A vast difference exists between Les Demoiselles d'Avignon and “Les Demoiselles d/L.A.,” if I may coin a caption—with an ungrammatical slash—for the SNNG publicity photo, simultaneously doubling it as a subtitle for Un titled Flesh. “Les Demoiselles d/L.A.,” a promotional mechanism consciously framed to represent the multicultural ensemble, declares the Girls' entry into the art world as feminist subjects. Although they blatantly seduce the viewers with their flowing contours, they also displace the seduction by foregrounding their own will and joy. Oliver has shrewdly observed that the Naked
Nature Girls “are in fact sex workers.”[42] The crafts of their trade hang in the balance between their self-determination and their service to satisfy the clients' libidinal cravings, if only vicariously.

From a different angle, Meyers affirms Oliver's remark and comments on how they deal with flesh exposure onstage: “I think the vulnerability has given us, as a group, the responsibility to figure out how to take care of ourselves on stage and, in turn, also how to take care of the audience.”[43] Meyers's notion of “responsibility” provides a key to unlock the transparent door stuck between “erotica and pornography,” which is one of SNNG's theoretical concerns. In essence, I suggest, both erotica and pornography exert bodily expenses: vulnerability; sexual labors incurred by fantasy, masturbation, or intercourse; threats of venereal disease; and so on. Erotica, however, differs from pornography in its ability to yield higher psychophysiological returns to the body. Erotica privileges the pleasures of the flesh, whereas pornography demands the flesh to make pleasures without necessarily honoring the contract of mutual determination. Erotica recognizes the responsibility to take care of the body's interests. On this score, pornography inevitably pales. Pornography therefore contrasts with erotica, both in quality and in quantity, by giving fewer pleasures to the one who serves than to the one being served.

Les Demoiselles d'Avignon has the erotic potential only for those viewers who stand outside the frame, looking in. “Les Demoiselle d/L.A.,” conversely, evades the pornographic trap by securing first and foremost the “sex” workers' own profits, witnessed both by the women's self-love and by their communal love. Naked Nature Girls have redefined “nature” in this context as unabashed declaration of their sexualities, of their instincts for self-preservation, and of their compassion for transgendered kindred spirits.

Memorials to the Invisible

While the danger and pleasure of representational visibility constitute a major area of the Nature Girls’ investigation, their performance also cuts deeper into the flesh to explore “nakedness” in its invisible dimensions.

Jump-cut to a brief scene in Untitled Flesh: A rope lies on the floor. A single naked Asian American woman (Uyehara) walks on it, shakily balancing herself with outstretched arms as if walking a tightrope. An African American woman (Oliver), also naked, cautions her from the side, “I don't know. I wouldn't walk on that thing.” “With people of African roots,” derides the tightrope walker, “there are certain things you can't share.” She proceeds with her action.

Darkness follows for eighty seconds.

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A bluish spot light now illuminates the elevated wire-mesh cage upstage. A woman (Brazell) faces us frontally, her exposed body sheltered by the cage. Another spotlight reveals the erstwhile tightrope walker standing with her back toward us. The caged woman starts telling a story about one fine day—the sky is blue, birds are singing, and she is walking, childlike, on a beach. With a few seconds' hesitation, the tightrope walker who hides her face from us also starts telling, in syncopation, her own beach story—of her relaxation and her sensual play with the waves.
The two characters' casually juxtaposed narratives become synchronized when they are both confronted by intruders. The caged woman grabs her own throat violently, yelling out curses in her rapist's voice. Meanwhile, the other woman describes how she conspires with her surprise visitor to succumb to the flesh. The woman under brutal attack is pushed to the ground, driven eventually to a semi-mute state: “Mom, mom …,” she cries. “It was a beautiful day. And I just wanted to go to the fucking beach.” At the same moment, the other woman turns around to address her audience: “Come on, look at me. I just want to have sex.”

Internalized Nakedness

This incredibly visceral scene treads the minefield of gender stereotypes. Both characterizations refer to the catalog of female roles circulating in mainstream culture: Brazell's “woman as victim” (when she doesn't want to have sex) versus Uyehara's “woman as vamp” (when she does want to have sex). Brazell and Uyehara allude to those manufactured images of “feminine” behaviors without ironic modifications. In their “straight” performance they seem to have compromised their positions as adversarial feminist commentators on popular culture. Tripling the scene's explosiveness is the fact that both women have literalized the “fates” of those stereotypical roles by performing them live. Brazell's “victim” actually experiences the violation when she enacts the rapist's vengeance by hitting herself on the chest and throwing her body on the floor. Uyehara's “vamp,” on the other hand, simulates the intercourse by gesturing masturbation. In their overlaid theater of traumas, they pull no curtains to cover their shames.

Juxtaposing Stereotypes

The two performers' challenge to the preexisting stereotypes lies in the juxtaposition of their parallel actions. The helplessness of Brazell's tableau of pain is countered by the freedom of Uyehara's sudden pageant of pleasure. In this arrangement, we witness the concurrent unfolding of familiar synopses related to women's bodies. While neither story contributes great insight to the general perceptions of women, the combination of the two exposes the fallacy of either stereotype's absolute claim to truth. For a stereotype is faulty primarily because of its overblown partiality; it construes its own partial reality as exclusively true. A stereotype is detrimental in that it reduces the complex, ambivalent, and heterogeneous body of truth without acknowledging its reductive violence. Worse, it passes on the dismembered fragments of truth-information as the whole truth, the only truth, and nothing but the truth.

In more specific terms, Brazell's “victim” might be recognized as a stereotype, but this recognition would neither protect the woman from being victimized nor prevent similar rapes. The fact that women are usually associated with victimization reflects the horror and frequency of such possibilities. Victimization is, very likely, a woman's experience. The important thing is to stress that it is far from being the only woman's experience. (Nor is it, of course, only women's experience.)

Brazell's stereotype is reframed as only a partial truth by the synchronized staging of another reductive truth: Uyehara's beach seduction scene. Recalling her self-conscious foreshadowing, Uyehara is indeed walking a tightrope in her rape fantasy episode. When she chooses to perform a lustful woman, by virtue of her racial designation, Uyehara cannot but confront the double stereotype of the “vamp” and the “dragon lady.” She seeks liberation from this
convoluted sexist-ethnic myth by adopting a deliberate performative strategy. Uyehara performs the episode chiefly with her back toward the audience. The iconographic effects of this spatial design enable her to assert an antagonistic position. In plain sight she ignores, dismisses, and literally turns her back on the audience, which has become, by default, the surrogate propagator of this gender-and-race, vamp-and-dragon-lady stereotype. Then, provocatively, she stretches the limit of this stereotype by embracing it for the benefits of her own sexuality. If she wants “sex,” then sex she will have—the audience be damned. Even so, her voyeuristic spectators are not easily off the hook. She turns around and questions their capacity for tolerance when they themselves become the joke of the moment.

The disturbing performance segments enacted by Brazell and Uyehara inspect a deeper layer of nakedness: internalized nakedness. Their dramas comment on the state of nudity as an inverted psychological condition when their naked selves are caught unprepared, seized without consent. While the invading others cut so swiftly and relentlessly to their cores, their flesh is exposed, stripped of the skin. Brazell's character reveals the “natural” vulnera-bility of women because of their—statistically—lesser and weaker physiques.

Heterotopias

Another section in Untitled Flesh consists of numerous collaged independent actions. A nude brunette (Brazell) crawls slowly on the floor, spitting out obscenities interlaced with biblical phrases. Her crawling is occasionally intercepted by an African American dominatrix (Oliver), who belts out recollected horrors from the history of slavery while hitting the floor with a whip. The brunette climbs up to the cage and becomes an exotic dancer, her torso bathed under an eerie red light. Another nude (Meyers) poses as a bodybuilder, flexing her muscles.

The performance configurations gradually shift in tone. The exotic dancer, now wasted, squats in a stupor. The bodybuilder repeatedly throws her torso against the floor. To the side, a mixed-race lesbian couple (Uyehara and Oliver) is engaged in a sadomasochistic ritual: the African American dominatrix is chased by her kneeling Asian American partner, who spans her with a whip and pursues her up a ladder raised from a circle of stones and withered leaves. The image presents a distorted amalgam of biblical parables: a mock crucifixion by “Jacob's ladder.” The defiant martyr portrayed by Oliver does not call upon her Father for mercy; rather, she chants her own apotheosis: “I decide to call myself Jezebel. I decide to change my name. I call myself Jezebel Pussy.”[44]

With the overlaid presentations of various probable scenarios, the cacophonous quartet challenges the totalizing force of stereotypes. The interactive S/M drama and the two solo actions encompass an array of emotional ramifications concerning women's experiences. The episodes are vaguely related to one another, creating a sense of disorder similar to Michel Foucault's analysis of the disturbing “heterotopias” as “the disorder in which a large number of possible orders glitter separately, in the lawless and uncharted dimension of the heteroclite; and that word should be taken in its most literal etymological sense; in such a state, things are
‘laid,’ ‘placed,’ ‘arranged’ in sites so very different from one another that it is impossible to find a common place beneath them all.”[45] The “common place” lost in the disparate episodes of *Untitled Flesh* is the sanctified “universal truth” about female sexuality. The manifested disorder coming out of these coexisting incompatible scenes serves to affirm one message: Variety is the rule rather than the exception in the province of desire.

Thematical ly, these collaged actions tackle the multifarious structures of relations that women have with their internal and external worlds. Such feminist themes, combined with the method of juxtaposition, allude to a particular strain of 1970s feminist/redressive performance in L.A. *Ablutions* (1972), for example, was also created collectively by four women artists.[46] It likewise included a duet, with a woman methodically winding gauze around another's body, and two solos—a woman nailing beef kidneys on the rear wall; another taking a bath in three tubs filled consecutively with egg yoke, blood, and clay. In the meantime, the soundtrack was a recording of women's testimonies about being raped. Toward the end of their heterogeneous actions, the performers were bound by a mess of ropes into immobility (see fig. 5 in Chapter 1).

Despite the similarities in their performance methods, what distinguishes SNNG's work from its feminist predecessors is its aspiration to diversity. SNNG's heterogeneity is biographically reflected by its members' divergent sexual identities. SNNG has further complicated its feminist politics to incorporate diverse ideological positions. In *Ablutions* the women are united by their joined protests against victimization; their possible differences are downplayed. The raw beef kidneys, the blood-drenched female body, and the cocooned figure all condemn patriarchal society's abusive sexism—the vicious violence of rape. There is no such clear-cut alliance by victimization in *Untitled Flesh*.

The sadomasochistic ritual played out between Oliver and Uyehara most overtly transgresses the preexisting mode of feminist collective art.[47] The two women, divided by their ethnicities and sexual roles, adopt the prey/predator dynamics in their sexual games, consciously alternating between aggressive and passive positions. Although their erotic ritual might not be endorsed by all, theirs is a carnel partnership sanctified by individual resolve and mutual contract. Given our present social circumstances, however, such personal sanctity can be tolerated only as long as the practitioners keep their erotic roleplaying within the private realm. Once the S/M act appears in public, the intimation of perversity immediately scandalizes the occasion, making it a public health or ethics hazard. By representing an S/M rite in performance, the Sacred Naked Girls deliberately provoke the audience's reactions. The spectators who witness the rite may feel the urge to judge. Their moral judgments can go at least three ways: to understand, to reserve disapproval, or to condemn. But they cannot remain sedated.

Through the “outrageous” ritual enacted by a mixed-race minority couple, *Untitled Flesh* forces open a space of ambivalence unavailable to a piece like *Ablutions*. *Ablutions* demands social justice as an appropriate response to its performance. *Untitled Flesh*, conversely, solicits diverse and very likely conflicting audience responses. It aims for both a larger variety and a greater scope in the freedom
accessible to women. The Sacred Naked Girls promote, here and elsewhere, tolerance for diversity.

**Recollected Nakedness**

The performance segments under discussion examine yet another interior layer of nakedness: nakedness as cultural memory or, in Oliver's insightful term, as “flesh memory,” a concept she invented during her former association with LAPD. Observing LAPD rehearsals, Oliver noticed that, though most members did not write down their scripts, they would usually repeat similar lines and physical movements in similar improvised situations. Our bodies, Oliver suggests, absorb our own histories and trajectories as “flesh memories”:

There is a text, a language, a mythology, a truth, a reality, an invented reality as well as a literal translation of everything that we've ever experienced and known, whether we know it directly or know it through some type of genetic memory, whether through osmosis or our environment. Our body holds its own truth and its own reality that may or may not correspond directly with what actually transpired in any given situation. We are trying to tap into the multiplicity of languages and realities that our flesh holds.\[48\]

This definition of “flesh memory” is informed by an inclusive philosophy. For Oliver, “flesh” refers to the body as an open receptor of all experiences—“the multiplicity of languages and realities”—that pass through its sensory field. As she identifies these experiences with “memory,” she places them in an elusive realm permeable by factual and fictitious information, cerebral and somatic knowledge. She packs the two words together and coins a term, “flesh memory.” The neologism conflates the conventional distinctions between “flesh” as a physical property and “memory” as a mental attribute.

“Flesh memory” is a major concept for SNNG’s work. It also provides the ensemble with an improvisational method. SNNG's discipline, then, lies in sensitizing the artists' “imaginary bodies,” to borrow an illuminating notion from Moira Gatens.\[49\] Through rehearsals and performances, the Sacred Naked Girls strive to heighten the elastic capacities of the mind-flesh-body-heart that remembers, ad-libs, alludes, appropriates, and freely associates.

Oliver's references to “genetic memory,” “osmosis,” and “environment” are ideas culled from natural science disciplines such as biology, chemistry, and ecology. Her statement sketches out a conceptual framework supported by metaphors, loose analogies, and the theme-oriented accumulation of ideas. Her eclectic methodology enthralls me because of the assertion that she can acquire any idea floating in the cultural ether merely by self-permission. The right to property, she seems to aver, comes with the very fact of residence. Her location and participation in contemporary culture give her the legitimacy to formulate any theoretical system for her art.

This sequence of reasoning becomes especially poignant considering that Oliver is African American. Her claim to ownership by participation pointedly evokes the history of African Americans' enslavement. Her ability to assume intellectual authority contrasts with the lack of freedom suffered by her ancestors who, being “American residents” forcefully imported from Africa, were not even allowed to own literacy. Within this context, the hegemonic intent implied by Oliver's act of universal appropriation becomes a strategy of resistance against the Anglo-American cultural hegemony. When she performs the S/M ritual, her theorization
explodes with the rage of direct accusation. As Marianne Dresser points out, “the erotics of bondage and domination” treated in the scene quickly “transmute[s] into an examination of the historical roots of S/M paraphernalia in chattel slavery.” Oliver has clinched the two references by spewing memories of slavery with a whip in her hand.

Both the site and source of flesh memory, the naked bodies enlisted by performance generate their own creative energies. Oliver explains further: “Flesh memory is more than just memory, it's the way we re-invent scenarios and worlds and languages and images to transcribe what we see, what we feel, what we think. It's a language that's activated in our bodies.” Flesh memory implies, then, an active agent who selects cultural experiences and programs them into art, as opposed to a passive receptacle of inert information. The body where flesh memories lodge digests experiential data to fabricate story-truth, if not true stories. In this light, the notion of flesh memory echoes what Antonin Artaud has proposed as the “sempiternal” self: “that is, a self that moves and creates itself at every instant.” The Girls' choice of improvisations in their training and performance suggests more than a stylistic preference; it is a methodology that—ideally—compels them to evolve “sempiternally” during every collaborative encounter.

In one aspect, the “sacredness” conjured up by the Sacred Naked Girls' untitled flesh arises from this very desire for instantaneous creativity embodied by their sempiternal being. In another aspect, their sacredness comes from self-affirmation. A striking example of the latter is what I've described as Oliver's “mock crucifixion by Jacob's ladder.” Oliver conducts her martyrdom-apotheosis by chanting a litany that both condemns the misogyny of Christian theology and renames herself. Up on that phallic ladder, she experiences the passion induced by the ongoing S/M rite. Oliver's Passion, then, springs from carnal sensations made spiritual by the “sacred” situation. There is no need for her to peep through Heaven's Gate above; she has pulled Heaven down to house her.

**Temporary Liberation**

Through storytelling, chanting, and body-painting ritual, the last movement of *Untitled Flesh* treats the theme of sacredness by self-affirmation, a motif that echoes Oliver's ladder rhapsody. The Sacred Nature Girls roll out an oblong carpet on the floor. They move various objects on it: flowers, bowls of fruits, stones—all products from Nature. They kneel on the carpet and pour little piles of colored mud-paints among the flowers and the stones. Applying the paint to their face and bodies, they chant in unison, “I'm sacred. I'm sacred. I'm sacred because I'm aging. I'm sacred because I really like to eat. I'm sacred because I cry…” The refrains about individual sanctity gradually involve the audience: “You're sacred. You're sacred.” By the act of naming, the Girls attempt to reach a holy fellowship with the audience.

With streaks of paint on their flesh, the Sacred Nature Girls align themselves on the carpet. They tell the audience a story about a sacred place for women where residents all have scars on their bodies: they all lack a tongue, an arm, a breast, or an ovary. “Some of them have incredible colors,” joke the Girls, “with matching-color fruits.” These legendary matriarchs are surrounded by flowers, plants, and anything that grows, so that they “won't ever forget how beautiful they are.” The Girls stand up, salute one another, admiring the paint marks that have scarred their bodies. They mingle with spectators, offering them flowers and fruits, and
praise everyone: “You are beautiful.” “They realize that they are warriors,” the Girls continue, “and that they are beautiful.”

Matrilineage

This fervent symphony of utopian affirmation pays homage to a mosaic of myths/histories from ancient Greece to the United States of the 1970s. SNNG's storyland floats between the island of Lesbos, where the poet Sappho once lived, and the kingdom of the Amazons, whose warriors each traded one breast for greater archery skill.\[53]\ The Girls' body-painting and scarification echo two groundbreaking performances in New York in 1975: Carolee Schneemann's *Interior Scroll*, in which the artist applied paint-marks to her nude body and extracted a winding parchment from her vagina, and Hannah Wilke's *Starification Object Series (S.O.S.)*, in which the artist scarred her nude body with vagina-shaped chewing-gum remains.\[54]\ In addition, what the Sacred Nature Girls term their collective “body journeys” recall two other modes of feminist performances in the 1970s: the local tradition of collaborative body-art projects and Goddess-archetype performances.

THE L.A. HERITAGE

I've compared SNNG's performance to *Ablutions*, a well-known piece from the region's feminist performance tradition. *Untitled Flesh* also bears resemblance to another performance from the 1970s: *She Who Would Fly* (1977), a tripartite installation created by Suzanne Lacy as part of her extended largescale performance event *Three Weeks in May* (see fig. 13 in Chapter 3). Both pieces feature four nude women with body paintings aligning themselves together; both deal with the mutilation of women's bodies. The two works nevertheless differ in their attitudes toward such mutilation. Lacy's piece condemns rapacious brutality against women. In the grip of extreme hardships, the four women who represent all rape victims are reduced to a catatonic state; their solidarity is one forged by common suffering. *Untitled Flesh*, on the other hand, shifts the focus from protest to recovery, from the ordeal of bearing physical and emotional distress to the possibilities of healing. *She Who Would Fly* censures the disgrace of female subjugation; *Untitled Flesh* depicts the multiplicities of female desire. Through the retelling of their feminist legends, the Girls turn the evidence of women's scarification into a testimony of their endurance. Their protest against violence against women consists in their refusal to succumb to despair and their insistence on the flesh's tenacity. While both pieces convey powerful political statements, *Untitled Flesh*, a 1990s feminist performance, highlights both self-resolution and community interaction as the means against oppression.

As the Sacred Nature Girls assert, victimization is only a temporary state from which the injured party must recover in order to carry on living. They encourage women to perceive their bodies in terms of “Nature,” which is tender and cruel, vigorous and annihilating at various moments. Their messages have both ethical and pragmatic overtones, urging women to recognize that even if they do suffer from physical and social disadvantages, their lives are far from being determined by their biology. Just as birth guarantees the prospects of decay, disease, and death, so tribulations are life's given. The experience of pain must not invalidate the body's curative capabilities: its flexibility, resilience, and recuperability. Like nature, the body restores itself with time; any revival is possible before death. There is “a strength in vulnerability,” maintains Brazzell, “a strength in the wounds and the scars,” for they are “like
medals of valor” to honor women's survival. With this accent on survival rather than on the violent deed, SNNG identifies the appropriation and transcendence of pain with triumph.

A sense of public responsibility fuels the stubborn optimism of SNNG's feminist drama. The Girls aim for social transformation by promoting a different understanding of the beautiful and the sacred. As their performance demonstrates, beauty does not come from conformity to certain accepted standards. Rather, beauty coexists with freedom and fortitude. It is this conflation of individual freedom and the capacity to rebound from damage that makes the female body sacred.

THE GODDESS TRADITION

The Girls' construction of the sacred links their efforts with the feminist foremothers whose performances of the late 1970s featured Great Goddess archetypes. According to Gloria Orenstein, artists such as Schneemann, Mary Beth Edelson, Ana Mendieta, and Betsy Damon regarded the use of Goddess motifs in their works as the catalyst for a rebirth of women's culture: “In its modern transformed meaning, it is about the mysteries of woman's rebirth from the womb of historical darkness, in which her powers were so long enshrined, into a new era where a culture of her own making will come about as a result of a new Earth Alchemy.”

The means of reaching this “Earth Alchemy” include the assumption of a “holistic mind-body totality” that reflects Goddess consciousness, “the repossession of the female visionary faculties” through “intuitive body-knowledge,” the restoration of “the spirit already inherent in the natural world,” and the “exaltation of natural energies” as the power of the Goddess. The female body and Nature are the two recurrent themes emerging from Orenstein's analysis, which is echoed by SNNG's practice of “flesh memory.” Between the Girls and their “sacred” precursors, we see a common emphasis on female body art. These artists have chosen to make their bodies an indispensable artistic component, reflecting the holistic flesh/consciousness model of corporeality explicated by Orenstein. Their common feminist purpose lies in repudiating the “cultural dominance of the masculine archetype, characterized by a mind-body duality.”

The Goddess-archetype practitioners adopt a literal understanding of “Nature,” taking it to be the embodiment of Earth Goddess. In their exuberant celebration of Mother Nature's sacred beauty, they have contributed to what Fritjof Capra has promulgated as the new paradigm of perception, “a holistic worldview” that he terms “deep ecology”: “Deep ecological awareness recognizes the fundamental interdependence of all phenomena and the fact that, as individuals and societies, we are all embedded in (and ultimately dependent on) the cyclical processes of nature.”

The artists who perform Goddess rituals consider themselves an element of nature, attempting to retrieve natural splendors with their art. Their efforts have shed light on an ecological awareness leading to contemporary environmental concerns.

The Sacred Nature Girls' performance quilt of feminist legends pays tribute to the view of deep ecology. The warrior-women in their matriarchal myths are surrounded by a lush natural environment. The performers also offer the natural bounties—fruits and flowers—to their spectators, their people. They differ from their “sacred” precursors, however, in their interpretation of “Nature.” Untitled Flesh submits a less innocent or exuberant view of “Nature” than that implied by Earth Alchemy or deep ecology.
The Girls have expanded the corpus of “Nature” by the same principle with which they have multiplied every other concept: “Naked”—“Girls”—[playing in]—“Nature”—[and acting/being]—“Sacred.” The Girls’ interpretation of Nature appears to have swallowed up the slash between Nature/Culture, together with the body of Culture itself. They have managed to elide the feminist debates about essentialism by refusing to acknowledge that a dichotomy exists between nature and culture. Their refusal to identify a female essence with a single ideological front has in effect nullified the anti-essentialist critique. In its approach to the tremulous explosion of desire, to the internalized bruises of history, and to the capacities of the flesh/consciousness to remember and rejuvenate, SNNG has marked Culture as the scars of Nature.

The above chain of signifying sequences leads us to the culmination of the Girls’ pilgrimage to the sacred. As Oliver states, “I like to try to marry the sacred and the profane. What I call the profane is life with its ugliness, scars, all of that. There is a sacredness in the profane, a spirit in material, and they intermarry, they don't separate from one another.” SNNG’s methodological rigor lies in its insistence on “intermarrying” radically varied concepts. It is a rigor earned by the Girls' consistent repudiation of monolithic uniformity and by their advocacy of the beneficial unification of differences. To phrase it in a more “culturally scarred” terminology, to intermarry is to perform the act of miscelenation. SNNG’s social vision, in this sense, proposes a literal writing of multiculturalism on the natural body of contemporary culture. My reading suggests that the multiethnic constitution of SNNG has a more embodied (imbued in flesh) reason than the superficial (only skin-deep) pursuit of the fashion called L.A. multiculturalism. They perform the invisible from the visible and journey deeper into the invisible to section multiple terrains from surface to core.

For this feminist quartet, “sacredness” initially comes with the ceremony of intermarrying among its triracial and multiethnic members. The health of SNNG as a collaborative unit, then, depends on its partners' continuous emotional and physical commitments to their artistic miscegenation. It requires constant effort to sustain the original sacredness. Meyers has emphasized the interpersonal engagement among the Girls as the cohesive force: We “learn to trust, that's where our magic comes from and that's what's most sacred.”

At this moment, however, since the Girls have decided unanimously to separate from their “intermarriage” for an indefinite period, Meyers's comment has unwittingly taken on the quality of an epitaph. The register of sentiments struck by her note shifts from the ardor of proclamation to the irony of presentiment. Did the Girls split because they “trust” that their “sacred” “magic” has dwindled? Or has their “magic” vanished because they could no longer “trust” the “sacredness” that bound them together? Has their claim for individual sanctity proved to be finally incompatible with the pains to maintain collective sanctity? Is their theory of intermarrying divergent values—individuality and community, differences and unification, the sacred and the profane—challenged by life's own convoluted logic, which defeats all theorization? Has the SNNG ensemble ceased to be an organism that liberates the members' artistic potentials and become instead a constraining institution? Could the suspension of SNNG's miscegenistic intermarriage indicate a dilemma larger than the fate of a particular group? Could the problems experienced by the Girls as collaborators indicate the difficulties inherent in this multiracial society that our contemporary culture seeks to understand, negotiate, and express? Does the sense of sacredness proposed by SNNG exist, at best, only as an immediate historical memory?
The last action in *Untitled Flesh* adds a physical footnote to Meyers's statement. It also demonstrates performatively what I've called the many-headed, newly evolved Hydra/SNNG. The Sacred Naked Nature Girls stand in various corners of their performance field. Disorienting lights flash in darkness, illuminating parts of the women's bodies alternately and intermittently. The frequency of the flashes creates an optical illusion that these women are more than four bodies; they are a multitude. They chant the opening refrain, “Will you catch me?” Their increasingly intense polyphony of overlapping monologic calls creates an auditory illusion that they are really of one giant body. There is a seamless coextension between the air, the light and darkness, the edges of their personal altars, and the fluent skin of their flesh.

The sacredness of unifying diverse multitudes arises from the balance between intersubjectivity and composite subjectivity. Such balance, nevertheless, subsists tenuously and fleetingly, in a state of transport, manifested as a mutable, performative utopia.

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7. Kinesthetic Transmutation of Theatricality

Consuming Art Performances

The Tone of Mutation

On the plate that ends all the plates gathered in this book, I give offerings that join sacrifice with celebration—the sacrifice of logic and the celebration of sensibilities; the sacrifice of empirical verification and the celebration of perceptual immersion; the sacrifice of historicity and the celebration of fluctuating intensities. I traverse a zone of negotiations between knowing and being, between perceiving and slipping half-awake through time; my words stagger from their desire to articulate coherent responses to their resigned participation in sentient confluence. I enter a terrain of indeterminate forms where excess spills into economy and incompatible categories cavort in a hybrid embrace. I chart a region of multiplicity that matches reticence with sensory surfeit, allowing an indifference to semantic ploys to drift alongside a forest of strange sounds, which ebb and flow like a memory collage: the concert of a screeching owl imitating a hog; a pack of robotic rats blinking away their newborn blindness; pots of genetically engineered tulips blooming and decaying; a turbulent grating of bacteria in multicellular fusion; a humming of electric currents in eddies of pollen-infested wind; boxes of cereal, syrup, and ketchup flying through the limelight; lumps of flesh testing the elastic pull of gravity on a concrete pavement. Call me a cartographer of nonsense—

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of senses that so overwhelm cognition they become their others—or a collector of imprecise phrases—those infelicitous textual shards that trace impressions caught in a state of abortion. Call me a narrator of art performance.

Art Performance: The New Wave?

My story about art performance deals with the manifestation of this genre in the work of four artists/ensembles in L.A.: Johanna Went; Toti Mercadante O'Brien, John O'Brien, and Steve Roden; Oguri and Renzoku; osseus labyrint. It would be succinct and convenient to introduce these groups as characters in my story and to describe how they all relate to one another in creating a unique L.A. style of art performance. But these groups are more like animated
figures occupying four distinct geographies than characters motivated into action by their conscious and unconscious decisions. Just as my “characters” are not dramatic in the strict Ibsenian sense, so their shared residency in this chapter reflects primarily the accidental fact that they all live and practice in L.A. Among the artists, however, there is no consensus as to what their “practice” consists of. One thing is for sure: none of these artists identifies what s/he does as “art performance.” Went simply calls her work “entertainment,” which reveals more of her artistic intention than the nature of her art.\textsuperscript{[1]} O’Brien, O’Brien, and Roden regard their work as a collaboration among three artists. Considering that they refrain from even giving a name to their ensemble, it is not hard to speculate how they might react to an identificational tag for their art.\textsuperscript{[2]} As artistic director of Oguri and Renzoku, Oguri usually presents his works as dance, but he also works in other capacities to produce performances that exceed the conventional framework of dance.\textsuperscript{[3]} The only group among the four that goes consistently by its company name is osseus labyrint, a loose constellation of artists led by Hannah Sim and Mark Steger. Sim and Steger call themselves “aliens” and conceptualize their art as “a laboratory of random mutations.”\textsuperscript{[4]} Thus, the theme I choose for my story about these artists—art performance—is better understood in a musical than a narrative sense. It sets up the mood fluctuating in between my verbal notes rather than restrictively delimiting the possibilities of my engagement.

In my usage “art performance” is neither a totalizing concept nor a prescriptive label. Rather, it is a provisional code for an immense field of divergent and evolving activities. It has a similar function to the name given arbitrarily to a newly discovered galaxy, not to fix its position permanently in the remote sky, but to approximate a territory of repeatable observations in the course of reorienting the telescope. In fact, as a nominal designation, \textit{art performance} serves my purpose here not for its exactness in naming my objects of inquiry, but for its associative fuzziness and broadness, qualities better suited to exclude what it is not than to define what it is.

Aware of the artists’ possible resistance to my classification, I place their live art outputs collected here in the genre of art performance primarily to distinguish these works from those I’ve discussed in previous chapters as redressive performances. Since redressive performance has been the dominant performance art genre in L.A. for the past three decades, to highlight the concurrent existence of an ideologically antithetical genre—art performance—reinforces my general observation about the region's multicentric performance art scenes.

In what ways, then, is an art performance antithetical to a redressive performance? Above all, an art performance differs from a redressive performance in that it does not originate in a remedial desire but departs from the premises of its own medium. An art performance does not strive to offer a positive alternative to a preexisting condition of stasis or malaise; nor does it attempt to compensate for the ills produced in realms of occupation other than art. For an art performance rarely responds to anything other than its own expressions—even though it may play with a wide range of themes or subject matter. Characteristically, an art performance shows little interest in contesting an unsatisfactory social condition or in overcoming a personal trauma. Although it may not define what art is, an art performance, unlike a redressive performance, makes no claim to be other than an artwork. The artist’s role in an art performance is seldom ambiguous: s/he is simply a live body accomplishing an intentional and durational action in a certain site, having simultaneously suspended her/his other potential roles as a citizen, healer, patient, seer, or provocateur.
By the same token, an art performance often retains a sense of detachment from topical issues and political agendas, exercising a higher degree of aesthetic autonomy. An effect of such detachment is that an art performance usually assumes no more than a tangential relationship with a given regional culture. An art performance marks its own territory as if in hermetic isolation; despite the fact that no performance is free from the constraint of its space and time (as the historicized place of its production), detachment is at least the operational presumption of an art performance. Most art performances, however, do interact with the globalized popular culture or allude to the postmodern reshuffling of the historical high and low cultures. Therefore, contrary to localized redressive performance, an art performance seldom manifests an inevitable connection with the locale of its production. An art performance produced in L.A., for example, would not necessarily exhibit signs linking it to L.A. Despite its noncommercial status and limited circulation, an art performance is essentially as transportable a product as a Hollywood film or an MTV video: even when they are made in L.A., they are made for the world.

The distinctions established between art performance and redressive performance tell us little about their historical relations. This is a blind spot resulting from the limit of multicentricity as my conceptual angle. While multicentricity stresses the coexistence of multiple centers, it does not account for each center’s relative scale or commonly conceded legitimacy on the overall historical map. My assertion that art performance has always occupied a space in L.A.’s performance history reveals nothing about its course of development. To trace the trajectory of art performance in L.A. depends on a comprehensive study of its practitioners, which this study is not. Since my multicentric inquiry avows the radical inadequacy of any one center, I stress that the picture I am drawing for art performance is no more than a particularly vigorous corner/center in the galaxy of this genre. The terrain of my exclusion is bound to be larger than the zone of my attention. This apology notwithstanding, I contend that my samplings are disparate and paradigmatic enough to signal the evolving configurations of art performance in L.A. A corner indeed my narrative inhabits, but a corner with hologrammic potentials, for my collection offers a fragment that radiates the whole.

Most of the artists/ensembles treated here as exemplary of art performance started their performance careers in the mid-1990s and continue to present new works. They happen to be the latest practitioners in my ongoing performance genealogy. My selection of these artists may then encourage the speculation that art performance has replaced redressive performance as turn-of-the-millennium chic in this fashion-hungry town. Such speculation is both exaggerated and reasonable. Note that I’ve included an exception in my sampling: Johanna Went, who has been presenting art performances in L.A. since the late 1970s. Went's long career suggests that art performance did not suddenly emerge in the 1990s out of the exhaustion of redressive performance; that, instead, art performance has always had its place and audience, even when redressive performance was considered the conceptual norm for performance art. The flip side of this observation is that redressive performance is not necessarily obsolete. Actually, in my opinion, only the assertion of a discontinuous historical map coordinated by linear progress wherein one trend substitutes the other is obsolete.

To question the notion of linear progress is not to deny that there is certain shift of emphasis, or unforeseen mutation, in the field of performance art. I may use the case of Went to pursue this analysis. There is as yet no single extensive scholarly study of Went's performances, even though she has been a highly prolific performance artist who attained a huge following in the punk rock and “industrial” club scenes during the 1980s in L.A. Why is there such
a discrepancy between her subcultural popularity and her academic obscurity? One reason may be that Went was bypassed for serious attention because her practice was anomalous at a time when redressive performance was taken to be the measure for “serious” performance art (“What I do is entertainment,” as Went herself declares). It appears that art performance, as practiced by Went and the other selected ensembles, has moved from the eclipsed cultural margins to approach the mainstream of marginal tastes—if performance art may still be considered a marginal taste. Since the mid-1990s, an aboutface seems to have taken place: art performance is drawing an increasing number of artists to its ranks precisely for its differences from redressive performance. Moreover, art performance, having suffered from accusations for its perceived lack of cultural relevance, critical substance, or political dimension, is no longer stigmatized for its “modernist” nostalgia.

The Theatricality of Art Performance

As I argued in Chapter 1, most performances are hybrid in substance and reveling in mixing genres. There is hardly any single performance that may be called a “pure” reflective performance, a “bona fide” redressive performance, or a “pedigree” art performance. Given this general caution, my focus here is on the mode of live performance that can be most incisively described as art performance. Yet another word of caution is needed: the privilege given to live performance here by no means asserts that an art performance piece is necessarily performed live for the public or that it can only be appreciated live. Chris Burden’s work, discussed in Chapter 1, clearly disputes such a collapse of identity between art performance and live performance, since his art performance projects are largely appreciated by posterity via their (reproducible) documentation or prosthetic representation. Nevertheless, in an attempt to unravel the psychosocial mechanisms underscoring an immediate theatrical event, I choose to explore live (art) performance in this chapter.

Among all performance art genres, art performance most approximates theater art. This statement does not equate an art performance and a theater work. While a theater work revolves around the fabrication of a consensual illusion, an art performance seldom overstates the metaphorical function at the expense of its literal dimension. What we see in an art performance is both what it is—a kinesthetic exhibition—and what it evokes—a fantastic enactment. While the artists may metaphorically suggest imaginary personas in an art performance, they never relinquish their matter-of-fact roles as the artists, but rather they foreground their status of being objects/materials, which are literally the mass, volumes, and surfaces available for aesthetic manipulation.

This fascination with the literalness or actuality of their present-tense actions reflects the art performance practitioners’ interest in the expressive capabilities of live performance as a mixed medium. An art performance constructs its visual and conceptual contents by exploring the intrinsic attributes of performance art as an interactive enactment. Often, such self-reflexive engagement with the medium itself translates into fastidious attention to the process of presentation, which invariably involves the treatment of theatricality. In my definition, theatricality is both the quintessence and the culmination of five interwoven elements: the time-space-action-performer-audience matrix. Within this matrix, the time is not only the designated hour and the length of the performance, but also the sense of time constructed by the action. The space indicates not only the determined performance locale and the particular use of its expanse, depth, areas, and dimensions, but
also the molding of space as a negative presence in the action. Accordingly, what is usually called the “site” of a performance involves at least two elements: the space engaged and animated by time during the performative process. The action in the theatrical matrix refers to the nature and types of activities involved in a performance, including the ways in which the performer manipulates the site and relates to the audience. The performer in an art performance is the entity that executes the action; the entity may comprise a solo artist or an ensemble of collaborating artists. The audience in an art performance resembles a theater audience, which sees, hears, experiences, appreciates, evaluates, and sometimes participates in the action.

All in all, based on my functional conceptualization, theatricality is not a quality specifically produced by a theater work; it is instead a floating affect occasioned by the constant interactions among the five elements in the theatrical matrix. Theatricality results not from the type of performance presented, but from the live performance medium itself, which creates the condition of the theatrical matrix. An art performance seizes the theatrical matrix as the subject matter and the central aesthetic task. There is a total collapse of methodology, form, and content in an art performance: the methodology creates the form that is the content of an art performance. By virtue of this total collapse, I argue, every art performance—theoretically speaking—submits a singular solution to the problem of theatricality. The generative function it serves is ultimately the accumulation of aesthetic possibilities for theatricality.

The above argument leads to an immediate question: Doesn't another performance genre, say redressive performance, also involve the process of presentation, hence the contact with theatricality? This question, I believe, arises from a confusion about intent and focus. To be carried out at all, a redressive performance certainly entails a process of presentation, but that process itself does not reflect the intent nor does it constitute the central task of a redressive performance. The focus of a redressive performance lies in the concepts—279—or issues—the what—addressed by a particular work; how these concepts or issues are presented matters less than that they are indeed performed, hence confronted, exposed, or redressed. Formalism, which is a manifestation of the how in a performance, is rarely the aim of a redressive performance, although it might be a coincidental effect resulting from the process in which the what of a performance is presented. Conversely, the intent and focus of an art performance share the same parameters: the how and the what in an art performance are selfsame. Formalism—as the desire to make forms—is ineluctably connected with art performance because it serves as both the motivation and validation of an art performance.

The fundamental difference between a redressive and an art performance results in an intriguing phenomenon: whereas a redressive performance is individually shaped by the target and the content (the what) of its redress, an art performance is molded by a prototypical quest for the specific articulation (the how-what) of theatricality. In this context, a redressive performance is a localized genre; its power emanates from its individually tailored microcultural-politics. The more sharply this micro-cultural-politics is communicated, the more irresistible the redressive performance. An art performance is evaluated by an antithetical set of criteria. It is a globalized genre, not in the McLuhanian sense that it caters to a global village, but because every art performance continues to explore the condition of theatricality. Each new piece adds to the global body of theatricality, activating certain hitherto little touched potentials and generating novel configurations for the theatrical matrix. The power of an art performance, then, lies in the originality and in the degree of rigor, polish,
delight, or depth an artist/ensemble is able to bring to the work, which in turn displays a particular interpretation of theatricality.

Admittedly, my theorization of art performance so far smacks of anachronistic mysticism. How can there be a global body of theatricality? Where is it located? In the moon rock shining in Westwood, the gated artificial lake in Glendale, or the Terminator ride at the Universal Studio? Are art performances not individually tailored and microcosmically cultivated by certain conscious and responsible artists?

To be sure, like any other artwork, an art performance has to be created piece by piece by a certain individual (or individuals). An art performance is nevertheless not a localized or individuated genre like a redressive performance, because it places the focus of its investigation on how to manipulate the theatrical matrix. In other words, different art performances similarly address the same theatrical matrix, which encompasses the five common elements: time, space, action, performer, audience. The global body of theatricality is constituted by the assemblage and interaction of these five elements. Theatricality is then located in the theatrical matrix, which is not a location perse but a chimerical condition. Theatricality presents a perennial challenge for art performance practitioners because it stands for a constantly changing set of circumstances. What is mystically phrased by me as the global body of theatricality involves some very concrete decisions, which are accomplished by myriad maneuvering techniques—those minute and often onerous solutions and labors expended in executing a live performance. Like international commerce, the theatrical matrix is volatile and uncontrollable, with interdependent and at times competing components, yet largely governed by chance, contingencies, misfires, “natural” disasters, and sudden flukes. Every art performance—to pursue my analogy—is a player in the global economy of theatricality; every venture contributes to the mobilization of imaginary capitals. Cash has no (personal) face, although it may be designated with exchange value and differentiated by its symbolic denomination. An art performance, likewise, may carry the signature of an artist, but it is itself the emanation of a function: the circulation of theatricality.

If all art performances function unifocally to animate theatricality, how do we distinguish one art performance from another? The instant answer would be: by the distinctive signature of the artist/ensemble, the performer within the theatrical matrix. In the case of art performance, the signature of the performer has less to do with its members' individual identities than with the style of their presentation. Two questions ensue from this assertion: What is the style of a performative presentation, and how does a style turn into a recognizable signature?

In the practice of art performance, the style of the performer is created by the recurrent deployment of a particular set of solutions to resolve the problem of theatricality. More specifically, the characteristic ways in which a performer approaches the theatrical matrix constitute the how-what of an art performance, which is perceived by the audience as the style of a presentation. Thus, theoretically, there could be as many different art performances as the number of their stylistic variations, which are potentially infinite. While there is no ontological or teleological divergence between different art performances, these artworks' singularities are marked by the multiplicious styles the performers apply to embody and express the theatrical matrix. The need to establish a distinctive style features prominently in art performance, for it is through the reiteration of a certain style over time that a performer (as a performing unit) acquires its memorable signature.
If the style of a performer epitomizes its particular engagement with theatricality, then its recognizable signature represents the most valuable commodity in art performance. Like a designer's brand name or a celebrated painter's touch, the signature of an artist/ensemble in art performance offers a special *aura* to the live event. This mysterious quality called “aura” is, in my conception, an irreplaceable ingredient in a performer's signature, recalling Walter Benjamin’s influential analysis in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.”[7]

Benjamin's essay introduces several key terms relevant to my argument here: aura, ritual function, cult value, exhibition value, and reproducibility. Benjamin explains two kinds of “aura”: the aura emanating from a natural object and the aura attributed to a work of art. The former results from “the unique phenomenon of a distance,” which renders, for example, the contour of a mountain seen from afar alluring. The latter is the obverse effect of an artwork's “authenticity,” a concept related to the presence, the unique existence, and the history of the original artifact. To elaborate on Benjamin's thesis: the aura of a natural object stems largely from the imperfection of our eyes, which can never fully surpass the distance and penetrate that which we behold—however close it is. The aura of an artwork, on the contrary, depends on the effort to mend our perceptual imperfection, since the authentication of the original often requires chemical procedures. Integrating these two essential aspects—distance and authenticity—will shed light on the primeval basis of aura, regarded as a quality inseparable from an artwork's original use value as “an instrument of magic” in ritual. In this sense, the aura of an artwork is intimately related to the object's “cult value.”

The obsession with authenticity in the tradition of art reveals the sway of the artwork's residual cult value, believed to proffer on its owner, more so than its maker, immeasurable power. Imbedded in this tradition is the disdain for a replica of the original by manual reproduction, which is branded as a forgery and by default can possess no aura: a false idol tenders no benediction. This reasoning, as Benjamin brilliantly anatomizes, shifts radically with the advent of mechanical reproduction, which overcomes both the distance and authenticity that have hitherto secured the aura of an original. Photography and film, two popular media that create art through mechanical reproduction, enable “the original to meet the beholder halfway”: the distance dissolves when the faraway mountain is brought to our local screen and when the capacity of our vision and hearing is astronomically enhanced by mechanical instrumentality; authenticity becomes a non-issue when the technology of mechanical reproduction annuls the dichotomy between original and replica. Thus declares Benjamin: “that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art.”[8] An artwork's cult value, grasped as a magical property, has henceforth been displaced by the artwork's “exhibition value.” Just as the cult value decreases when an object loses its privilege to remain largely hidden, so the exhibition value increases when an object is able to circulate among an increasing number of viewers.

Following Benjamin's proposition, the decay of aura finds its root in contemporary technology's sheer ability to churn out reproductions of artwork. The phenomenon has qualitatively transformed our expectations of art, substituted our craving for “a unique existence” with “a plurality of copies,” and numbed our taste for such live art mediums as theater. Benjamin's cogent argument has tremendous implications for the study of contemporary art. It has a particular significance for L.A. because film is the city's capital art
medium. Within this local context, it is clear that no live art medium can compete with the hegemony (ubiquity, popularity, and critical clout) of film. As it exists in a crisis state, a live art performance event must attract its cultural consumers via a different route. It cannot match the “montage of attractions” afforded by film, so it often resorts to “selling” those very qualities negated by or simply unavailable to film. Herein lies the performer's desire/solution to cling to, or even to reify, some of the archaic values pronounced obsolete by Benjamin on behalf of mechanically reproducible art.

In my observation, an art performance tends to construct its exhibition value precisely on its cult value. The most frequently seen prototype of art performance in L.A. goes against the grain of mechanical reproduction and other technological imperatives by resuscitating the cult value of live art and by intensifying the aura of a performer. Such a retrieval of cultish aura is done with a twist, however. Benjamin distinguishes traditional visual objects from mechanically reproduced images by linking the former with “uniqueness and permanence” and the latter with “transitoriness and reproducibility.” While qualities such as uniqueness, permanence, and authenticity indeed characterize the value of traditional artwork (e.g., a classical painting), they don't necessarily all apply to a live art performance. The primary artifact exhibited and produced by a live art performance is, after all, a single human body or an ensemble of bodies, which assume the curious property of simultaneously being natural objects and manipulated artworks. As natural objects, these bodies are unique but impermanent; they are enveloped in a perceptual distance that cannot be eradicated by the unequipped human eye. As auratic art products, their “authenticity” never really becomes an issue, for the human bodies cannot be forged—at least until the day when cloning technology will change my present common sense. Both phenomena resulting from a performing body's dual properties as art elucidate the art performance practitioners' propensity to display aura as the manifested value of their works.

Let's return to our discussion of artistic signature. An art performance succeeds in establishing a premium signature at the moment when the aura radiating from a performer's live presence becomes not only nonreproducible but irreplaceable. Adding to the aura of such a signature is the cultish promise that the exhibited sights and sounds are rarely found anywhere else and that they are seen and heard only by self-selected few. Re-endowed with these ritualistic mystiques, the body secular in an art performance is turned into the body wonderful. And the spectators may be piqued into exchanging the ease of going to the ubiquitous movie house for the trouble of attending an art performance in an isolated locale. They willingly become part of the theatrical matrix in order to commune with, or at least to consume (to engross), the live presence of the performer.

My exposition now turns up in a paradox. I hypothesized that art performance is a globalized genre in that each piece in this vein contributes to the circulation of theatricality. I also maintained that an art performance can distinguish itself by the performer's inimitable signature. While the first statement serves to diminish the individuality of an art performance, the second conversely inflates a piece's value by its singularity. How do we reconcile these seemingly contradictory claims?

I suggest that each of these paradoxical qualities has the potential to appear in an art performance, but they may not always coexist. My first thesis comments on the aesthetics of art performance, whose primary task is to express, utilize, and manipulate the theatrical matrix. As such, the problem of theatricality is a constant condition in an art performance, a
condition that remains central to the aesthetic dimension of this genre. My second thesis points to the particular attraction of art performance as a theatrical enactment that capitalizes on the performer's exceptional signature. This observation focuses on the variable quality of an art performance, whose highest appeal may be compared to a state of grace embodied by the performer's auratic presence. Not all art performance pieces, nor every piece by a well-known artist/ensemble, can reach the state of grace. For the state of grace is never a guarantee, only a promise.

My chosen vocabulary (signature, aura, presence, cult, grace) for the charismatic potential of art performance plants this variable quality in the metaphysical dimension. Tome, the irresistible charm of an art performance arises from the layering of its aesthetic and metaphysical dimensions. The ingenuity of its aesthetics—fleshed out by its treatment of theatricality—delights our senses, while the evocation of its metaphysics—the invisible cosmology triggered by its visible actions—enthralls our being. “Metaphysics” and “the mise-en-scène”—the two dimensions submitted by Antonin Artaud more than half a century ago to be the essential criteria for his theater of cruelty—endure as a viable gauge for the power of art performance. One distinction must be made: an art performance may not be a theater of cruelty, whereas a theater of cruelty is, by Artaud's paratheatrical intentionality, a composite of redressive and art performance.

The aesthetics and metaphysics of art performance belong to two different perceptual orders. In my conception, the aesthetics of art performance is related to the order of ornamentation and the metaphysics of art performance to the order of miracle.

If theatricality occupies the aesthetic center of art performance, it follows that every piece in this genre, while revolving around the common center, adds to the proliferation of styles, which signify the manners of ornamentation. The raison d'être for ornamentation lies not in its meanings or narrative contents but in the multiplication of forms. I may therefore characterize the aesthetic tendency of art performance as the generation of multiplicitous forms organized by a recurrent style. This tendency explains why different art performance pieces produced by an artist/ensemble frequently look like variants of a continuous aesthetic quest, for they are ornamental modifications on a reiterated stylistic mode. As an experiment on ornamentation, an art performance is vulnerable to accusations of irrelevance or anemic indulgence precisely because it exercises a self-referential pursuit for aesthetic variation. By the principle of aesthetic variation, an art performance creates its visual surface or formal appearance by the accretion of diverse ornamental motifs.

The aesthetic principle of ornamentation, however, cannot account for the full power of an art performance, when its surface materiality is transfigured by the depth of its affect. Such a depth resides in the metaphysical dimension of art performance. To my taste, the highest thrill of an art performance resembles the sudden encounter with an apparition. An occurrence beyond all expectations has intruded into the scene, transporting the beholder to a state of ecstasy that mixes awe with fear, surprise with disbelief, violent tranquillity with unspeakable illumination. It is the experience of a visual passion so electrifying and of a psychic predicament so pleasurable that it approaches the perception of a miracle. When a miracle happens during an art performance, the spectator's single act of cultural consumption delivers an epiphany charged with spiritual, perceptual, and cognitive elation.
Figures in a Field

More as installations of various art performances than testimony to my theory I fashion what follows. The figures installed are culled from L.A.'s performance art scenes, which are as dispersed as the city's built-environment and its more or less segregated cultural terrains. Johanna Went has presented her performances most frequently in Chinatown's and mid-Hollywood's punk and new wave music clubs, which she prefers over the regular theater venues.\[12\] The trio formed by Toti Mercadante O'Brien, John O'Brien, and Steve Roden has staged performances in art galleries, museums, studios, garages, and a friend's backyard. Their home base “at the Brewery project,” an alternative gallery run by John O'Brien, is located in the northeast corner of downtown L.A. Oguri and his life and career partner Roxanne Steinberg, with their dance company Oguri and Renzoku (meaning, in Japanese, “continuum”), have a standing artistic residency in La Boca, a chapel turned warehouse theater-and-dance workshop founded by Sarah Elgart at the Sunshine Mission/Casa de Rosas, which provides shelters in South Central L.A. for women in transition.\[13\] The group has performed in museum courtyards, public plazas, proscenium theaters, and loft spaces. osseus labyrint has frequented all sorts of enclosed and open-air performance sites, ranging from hotel lobbies, deserted mansions, black-box theaters, to the concrete-filled riverbed of Los Angeles River. The company's performance outings track the path of artistic nomads in L.A.: their cars are their horses, their curatorial sponsors the green pastures, and their spectators the life-sustaining water.

As art performances, the majority of works produced by these artists have at most a covert relationship with their individual identities. But the personal backgrounds of these performers, like the frame that supports the painting or the fringe that contaminates the center, do add interesting footnotes to their art. Fact Number 1: most of these artists were originally out-of-towners or foreign-born. Went grew up in Seattle; Toti O'Brien is Sicilian and her husband John O'Brien was born in Japan and grew up in Italy; Oguri is from Japan; Hannah Sim and Mark Steger started osseus labyrint in San Francisco. Fact Number 2: many of these artists never anticipated becoming performance practitioners when they grew up. They worked at odd jobs, traveled incessantly, or pursued other art disciplines until one day they stumbled across a performance artist or a theater/dance workshop that accidentally changed the course of their lives. Fact Number 3: all of them have settled in L.A. because they discovered in this unpredictable and sprawling city divergent pockets of support that have enabled them to present performances without depending on the box-office intake. Many of their performances are supported by (very) modest grants and open to the public for free or a small price. They all have found semiregular day jobs roughly related to the city's entertainment or educational industries in order to subsidize their art. Unlike New York City, L.A. imposes no stigma on “professional” artists who regularly work only parttime on their crafts.\[14\]

Went was a store clerk in Seattle before she met her mentor Tom Murrin, the Alien Comic, whose anarchic humor so inspired her that she began doing guerrilla performances on the streets with the Balloon Theater, which in the early 1970s featured actors in androgynous makeup building “huge floating structures out of helium-filled balloons.”\[15\] Went also joined Murrin's North America-Europe tour with DWARF (or, Theatre That Doesn't Get in The Way), producing improvisational actions in schools, shopping centers, and small theaters. She made her solo performance debut at the Hong Kong Cafe
in L.A. in 1979. Toti O'Brien worked in the circle of “third theater” (the name for noncommercial or avant-garde theater in Europe) between Rome and Paris for half a decade before she emigrated to L.A. She realized here that she had to call her theater works “performances” so that her audience would not have the wrong expectations. John O'Brien and Steve Roden were both trained in visual arts. O'Brien had practiced and then retreated from live art until he joined his life and career with that of an active performer, Toti. Roden had always done sound pieces together with his paintings; he joined the O'Briens as the third movement performer after serving as the sound artist for the couple. As a curious youngster, Naoyuki Oguri was entranced by avant-garde dance and happenings in Japan in the early 1980s; it was an intercultural landscape invigorated by the legendary prankish happenings of Hi Red Center and the underground Butoh mystiques of Tatsumi Hijikata.[16] Oguri immersed himself in this landscape by training with the dancer/choreographer Min Tanaka's Body Weather Laboratory, in which he worked as a farmer and performed as a dancer. He settled in L.A. because in his own country he could not have worked as a full-time artist. Steinberg studied postmodern dance in college and visited Japan to do some choreographic work. She ended up participating in dance workshops with Tanaka. Steinberg sees her collaboration with Oguri as dance rather than as performance art or art performance. Both Sim and Steger participated in the experimental dance and theater scenes in San Francisco; they started developing their own breed of alien body art when they joined forces in 1989 to find an expression that would connect their athletic proclivities with a mutual interest in science, animation, and pop culture.

Multicentricity provides a sharp angle to view the disparate aspirations and diverse biographies of these art performance practitioners. Their live artworks, however, do share some discernible tendencies to justify their adjacent placement in my virtual gallery called “Chapter 7.” These tendencies characterize the aesthetic affinities among my selected artists/ensembles, although they are not necessarily typical of all art performances. The terms I use to describe these aspects—nontext basis, body technology, improvisation-genesis, homixenology, and audience consumption—may sound unfamiliar; the techniques contained in them are by no means revolutionary. In fact, each aspect corresponds to a tentative idea laid out by Artaud's *The Theater and Its Double* in the 1930s. What is remarkable is the degree to which the four groups take these techniques into their performances, as well as the variety they display.

**Nontext Basis.** Almost all the performance works produced by the selected groups are movement-based rather than text-based. In appearance, these performances might be broadly recognized as dance theater, although visual design and performance concepts also feature prominently. Music, instead of speech, plays the central role in creating the auralscapes in these works. Some of the pieces are performed, however, in silence, with the sounds of breathing, stretching muscles, rotating props, and clashing bodies as the only music. Language is incorporated as sound poetry; spoken words are juggled in the air or spit out from the larynx like fluttering verbal ribbons. Such use of the language, as Artaud describes, “turns words into incantations. It extends the voice. It utilizes the vibrations and qualities of the voice. It wildly tramples rhythms underfoot. It pile-drives sounds.”[17] The symbolic value of language is displaced—but not destroyed—by the material attributes of the sounds and the physicality of the performing bodies.
Body Technology. But often it's more than the Artaudian “poetry in space” that these movement-centered performances exhibit. The body gestures of a Went piece are so dominated by a wild abandon that her movement language is more akin to a tornado on stage than poetry in space. Poetry in space is more appropriate as a description for the somatic lyricism issuing from O'Brien, O'Brien, and Roden's movement pieces, but a generous awkwardness at times staggers the performers' motions, turning their poetry in space into three-dimensional nursery rhymes or nonsensical tongue-twisters. Oguri and his collaborating dancers enact both haikus in the void and grotesque scriptures on the earth. The hybrid choreography danced by this intercultural ensemble mixes the exactitude of anatomical physics with evocative poetry in space. Sim and Steger of osseus labyrint have created an astonishing series of kinetic vocabularies that veer between acrobatics and extreme sports, between corporeal animation and a transgressive ballet. Their movements systematize poetry in space with a mathematical rigor so that it becomes a body technology, a science of cyber-mechanics operated by little else than their own flesh.

Improvisation-Genesis. “The theater is the only place in the world,” observes Artaud, “where a gesture, once made, can never be made the same way twice.” Artaud's claim for the uniqueness of theater art may be grandiloquent, but his remark pinpoints the nonduplicatable quality of gesture. In contrast to a written language, a gesture can scarcely be copied exactly. There is a higher degree of liberty and distortion involved in mimicking a gesture than in transcribing a discursive text; this is so even with the coded sign-language, for any impression—vocal, facial, or gestural—made by the live body is affected by the impermanence of the flesh. In this sense, to create kinetic sculptures in a body-based performance is to be always in the throes of improvisation, no matter how rehearsed the enactment may be. Since the selected art performances all apply certain types of body technology, improvisation both features as a supreme methodology in making and rehearsing the pieces and extends to the performance process as a continuous generative force. When no rehearsals are held, as is the case with Went, the process of improvisation becomes the performance itself.

Homi-xenology. To cultivate the technological capacity of the body is to mold or transform the body into hitherto unexpected, unimaginable, even impossible, corporeal forms. A consistent strategy adopted by the four groups to showcase their body technologies is to allow their human actors to merge performatively with the bodies of others—gods, demons, monsters, animals, plants, minerals, insects, bacteria, machines, sign systems, natural elements, extraterrestrial beings. I offer the neologism “homi-xenology” to account for the transitory fusion of two mutually alien forms—the body of the human performer (“homi,” an inflected prefix derived from the Latin homo) absorbing the postures, gaits, proportions, behaviors, and imagined psychic states of other species (“xenology,” from the Greek xenos and suffix “logy”). A freeranging creative method, homi-xenology draws inspiration from the biological, scientific, and fantastic worlds in order to extend the ornamental reach of the performer's body. Such a kinetic merging of the human performer with the body of others resembles what Artaud posits as “totemism,” which is created on “behalf of actors”: “the old totemism of animals, stones, objects capable of discharging thunderbolts, costumes impregnated with bestial essences— everything, in short, that might determine, disclose, and direct the secret forces of the universe.” Artaud believes that totemism, like brimstone, is a source of constant magic, which will help us rediscover and exercise the vital forces of life. While his belief is esoteric and unverifiable, Artaud's comment serves to analyze the inexplicable sensations that we might experience while witnessing a spectacle of “the
What we marvel at perhaps is the tremendous power of the human imagination that craves for maximum expression, which is indeed a manifestation of vitality.

_Audience Consumption._ In his Second Manifesto for the Theater of Cruelty, Artaud imagines the production of a spectacle so encompassing spatially that it utilizes the entire hall of the theater, from the floor to the wall to the light-hanging catwalks. The spectators are so assaulted by the constant onslaught of light, images, movements, and noises from all directions that “there will be no respite nor vacancy in [their] mind or sensibility.” I doubt that Artaud’s spatial scheme is the only way to create a vigorous theatrical experience, but his analysis insightfully portrays a spectator’s _all-consuming_ involvement (no perceptual vacancy left) with an intense manifestation of theatricality. I find Artaud’s manifesto most useful as a description for how a live audience relates to a (theatrical) performance. Although Artaud might well reject my chosen vocabulary, I venture to suggest that this relationship between a theatrical enactment and its immediate receivers is best construed as an act of _consumption_ on the part of the audience—taking “consumption” as

both an absorption and an expenditure. While these spectators may regard themselves as cultural consumers, the selected art performance practitioners also relate to their spectators as those who _consume_ their spectacles, which are products made as transitory commodities and cultural diets. The spectators may or may not enjoy what the artists offer; they may appreciate, comprehend, feel confused or put off by the spectacle; they may wander off or shut off their attention from time to time, but they are there spending the time watching the performance unfold from its emergence to dissipation. Insomuch as _consumption_ is a digestive act, these spectators are _consumers_ experiencing a transaction: they inject, absorb, or waste the spectacle in exchange for momentary sensory gratification, aesthetic elevation, or mnemonic stimulation. What has transpired in the performative transaction—however interactive it has been—exists nowhere but in the partial remembrance of those who produced and those who consumed the spectacle. Something invariably is lost after the performance, even to its video documentation. That something lost is that which has been consumed entirely during a performative transaction; it mirrors the irrevocability of life itself.

_Gallery Chapter 7_

It's time for me to plunge into the real thing—to trace individual trees and remember their scented branches, having meandered so far in the forest.

As I have argued, art performances have potentially two dimensions: the aesthetic and the metaphysical. The first dimension is a constant that belongs to the order of ornamentation. The second is a variable that belongs to the order of miracle. What is constant is easier to capture than what is variable—for both the artist and the critic, I suspect. Such reasoning guides my inscriptions of the selected art performances in this virtual gallery. There might or might not be moments of miracle bursting forth from my inscription. For it's the nature of miracle to defy anticipation. Tender mercies are upon us, however, for miracles also thrive on a perpetual promise.

_Entropic Carnival: The Art of Johanna Went_

W.B. Yeats, having attended the first performance of Alfred Jarry's pataphysical farce _Ubu Roi_ in 1896, sadly wrote in his diary, “... after our own verse, after all our subtle colour and nervous rhythm, after the faint mixed tints of Conder, what more is possible? After us the
Savage God.”[23] Yeats's sadness came from mourning the loss of subtlety, elegance, and suggestiveness projected by his poetry in the face of the onslaught of a spectacle so alien to his taste and so aggressive in its impact that he had to invent a new name for it:

“the Savage God.” This coinage by Yeats, however precise it is from the poet's stunned perspective, sounds like a euphemism compared with Jarry's own description of what compels him aesthetically: “It is common usage to call ‘monster’ an unfamiliar concord of dissonant elements: the centaur, the chimera are thus defined for those without understanding. I call ‘monster’ all original inexhaustible beauty.”[24] In Jarry's world of monsters, there is no hierarchy to set off different degrees of monstrosity; nor is there any need to govern, justify, or comprehend the existence of monsters beyond the statement that they are “all” endowed with “inexhaustible beauty.” While Yeats's comment reveals a patrician notion of art and beauty controlled by a subliminal system of dichotomy—“Savage” vs. (civilized); “God” vs. (poets or human characters)—Jarry's proclamation subverts the Yeatsian dichotomy with three implications: (1) beauty lies in the eye (and the ear) of the beholder; (2) monster, or monstrosity, is an aesthetic order; (3) anarchic democracy—instead of canonized dichotomy—permeates the world of monsters. For me, Jarry's aesthetics of monstrosity provides access to Johanna Went's carnivalesque performances.

Here are some sketches from Went's Alchemy of Monsters (1991), staged in the Gallery Theatre, in Hollywood's Barnsdall Art Park.[25]

An assembly of bizarre spectacles transforms the midsize proscenium stage into a pastiche of an unholy church. The symbol of the Passion appears as a silver skull-face made of papier-mâché, resembling a giant Halloween mask, which gapes at the audience from backstage right. To its left stands the altar, a largely flat, screenlike sculpture composed of three panels of uneven sizes. Or maybe the sculpture is actually a grotesque triptych: the right panel is covered in black; the middle panel looks like a mixture of the Sphinx and an Egyptian princess, with a painted face in royal headgear, a torso sporting two flesh-colored breasts, and a lower body that swells into a throne; the left panel, shaped like a displaced neck and shoulder, carries the caption: “we are monsters.”

In front of this screen stand three ambiguous personas cloaked in mock priest'shabits, like hellish projections from the triptych; their green half-masks lit in (the purplish) black light fashion this bestial trinity into mongrels between a monkey, a tiger, a bear, and a troll. “I am a beast and I've always been a beast,” chants one of the figures. “I've never been human. Never. Never.” The other two pick up the refrain and join in at different moments, “Human, human. Never been human. Beast beast. Never never.” Their cacophony chanted a cappella repeatedly confirms the bestial trinity's status as a chorus of monsters.

Moreshadowy presences haunt the vicinity of the unholy church. A gnome in a Day-Glo green full-body mask with two pointed ears and no facial features plays with a circus ring on the side; suddenly its head pops out, becoming
an elongated, wobbling tube. A witch appears. She wears a stereotypical triangular hat and a curved nose but an atypical infant's pinafore and a pair of conelike protruding breasts on top of her black cape (fig. 35). A mike in hand, the witch screams and dances with a giant die marked with the $ sign, while the monster chorus disbands to play a giant die game on their own. The witch sits on the Sphinx-throne and pulls out a new mask from inside her dice to transform herself into another monster, one that might be called a two-faced demon: the upper face looks feminine, but from its back an elastic neck stretches longer than the demon's body to end in a masculine face. The twofaced demon carries its own truce between opposites anywhere it goes, juggling songs and conversations between its two faces, which serves each other's obligatory audience.

The next parade of monsters moves the scene to a makeshift botanical garden. A black-robed ogre with a red dot for a face wrestles with the vine that encircles its body. A Smurf with a humongous flower head made of red-tinged, floral-patterned flannel and a stem with blue leaves waltzes on the side. The background “mood” music, arranged and performed by Mark Wheaton off-stage, slides into a distinct American folk motif as a sinister goblin creeps in. The goblin's head is made of two layered masks—an olive green knitted web wrapped around a stocking mask—and its body fits into a two-tiered robe that features the stars-and-stripes pattern of the U.S. flag, with a plastic catheter sticking out from its abdomen like a misplaced tail. “Die, dead, die… go away,” the flower Smurf pleads when the goblin attacks it, pulling out its petals piece by piece. “Oh, my flowers,” the Smurf mourns while dodging from further blows. Wheaton's music drives to a trembling crescendo. Enter a lion-size caterpillar with a two-dimensional head and a fuchsia-and-blue fabric torso (manipulated by two actors hidden underneath the cloth). Poor flower Smurf— it bumps into the caterpillar and is swallowed whole. “Oh, my flowers!”

But new life pushes forward before the dead is fully digested. In flies a birdgenie with a yellow cockscomb, an orange tuxedo-jumpsuit that exposes two naked legs, and a pair of wings made of layered tatters. “Give it to me. I want it. It's mine. Give it to me now.” Incessant cries of an invisible but demanding monster flow in from the wing. The cries
conjure up a living phantom of Avarice, wrapped from head to toe in squares of fragmented U.S. flag patterns, a stylistic motif dubbed the “White House lawn” by Went. The covetous invader sneaks in toward the bird-genie, trapping its prey in a large butterfly net and dragging it out of sight. Distorted American anthem melodies usher in a hideous but incongruously funny act: the orange bird-genie is now harnessed, pulling the avaricious bird-catcher in a cart, the kind customarily used by janitors for their mops. The bird-catcher triumphantly waves a toy shovel as his scepter, oar, and whip.

“Johanna Went regards monstrosity with great tenderness, and makes use of its power,” writes C. Carr in her review of Twin Travel Terror (1987), performed by Went and her “twin” assistants, Lucy Sexton and Anne Iobst of Dancenoise (fig. 36).[26] Carr's prescient observation of Went's “tenderness” toward monsters recalls Jarry's fondness of monstrosity for its “inexhaustible beauty.” Like Jarry, Went shows no hesitation to embrace those who are typically seen as “abnormal,” “strange,” “revolting,” “filthy,” “freakish,” or “unsavory.” She surrenders her stage for their habitation, turning monstrosity into her standard of beauty.

If Went understands the power of monsters as an undertapped source of aesthetic pleasure, how exactly does she draw from such power in performance? I approach the question from two interrelated sides: the experiential dimension and the stylistic dimension. The experiential dimension arises from the convergence of visual, aural, and tactile sensations triggered by the performance. High decibel impact and tremendous energy release characterize the sensations provoked by a Johanna Went show. Went screams, sings unintelligibly, chants in hypnotic codes, turns her voice into a noise synthesizer,

36 Johanna Went, Twin Travel Terror, 1987, performed at Shuffy Theatre, Amsterdam. Johanna Went is the two-headed nun, and Lucy Sexton and Anne Iobst are seen wrestling. Courtesy of Johanna Went.

jumps up and down, and moves incessantly, tearing things to shreds and throwing oversized props and costume-carcasses at the spectators. The spectators often reciprocate her mischief by tossing these abject trophies over their heads or hurling them back on stage. Physicality literally compels the performer and the audience alike, circumscribing them in a zone of communal experience like an erotic charge—released from the clashing flesh between a hurricane and a deluge. Electricity is in the air, penetrating those who are present in a Went performance at the molecular level.

The experience offered by a Went performance cannot be separated from the effects of her style. Although Went says she is not familiar with Jarry's work, the French playwright's
notions illuminate her attitude toward and treatment of monstrosity. “An unfamiliar concord of dissonant elements”—Jarry's summation of the common perception of “monster”—describes the central design concept of Went’s aesthetics.[27] As illustrated in the opening scenes from *Alchemy of Monsters*, Went creates monstrous characters primarily through *uncanny* costumes. The effect of uncanniness is induced to a great extent by the freedom with which Went manipulates objects. A *naive* freedom allows Went to ignore taboos and commonsensical restraints and an *aggressive* freedom enables her to exercise a fantastic logic.

In her costume design Went employs at least three characteristic ways of prompting the sense of incongruity, displacement, and twisted scale. Most of her costumes collage incongruous elements: an animal head on top of a human body, a troll in a priest's habit, a feminine visage twined with a masculine one. Parts of the masklike costumes are combined in an *improper*, or rather *improbable*, way: a neck extends from behind the brain and curls around the body like a serpent's tail, leading to another head, which in a later scene becomes an exhaust tube for quantities of shiny blue spaghetti.

An untitled 1998 retrospective performance by Went exhibits many of her costumes/monsters. A gigantic head with three eyes walks alongside its lower body, whose central feature is a huge vagina that opens at the center of a boxlike mask worn by an actor, who occasionally spews liquid from the furry hole. Parading together with the head and the vagina is an enormous palm that waves at the audience seductively, reciting a mantra: “Touch me”! In this pageant of costumes, we see not only improperly combined body parts but body parts improbably driven asunder. The weirdness of these displaced costume parts is heightened by their excessive size: what is cute becomes monstrous when it's blown out of proportion. The distress of a humongous flower fairy seems both pathetic and hilarious because its proportional aggrandizement renders its tragedy out of focus. The fairy's twisted scale is so alien to my habitual cognizance of a delicate flower that I cannot respond to its catastrophe with the monotone of unconditional sympathy. My response is thus doubled: compassion mixed with incredulity, or rather quadrupled: the Aristotelian poetics mixed with the Artaudian cruelty—I sense *pity* for the flower even as I *fear* its monstrous energy; I *laugh* at the ritual of its deflowering even as I heed the *danger* of that allegorical violence.[28]

In *Portrait of Johanna Went* (1989), a video documentary by Lauren Versel commissioned by the Woman's Building's “Eye on Art” series, Went declares that she has “an affection for objects” and that “this affection is mutual.”[29] A mutual affection suggests an emotional intimacy between the artist and her artworks so that an intersubjective exchange is possible. “I believe that observing and touching these objects stimulates my imagination in such a way that I actually feel they communicate to me. It is similar to those sense memory exercises that a person might learn in high school drama class, but much faster and frenetic,” claims Went in an interview with Karen Finley.[30] The intersubjective communication with her artworks enables Went to treat these objects not only as the end products that become engaged in performances but also as catalysts in her creative process. To prepare for a piece, as Went explains in various interviews, she starts by collecting found and leftover articles from thrift stores, garbage bins, junkyards, supermarkets, and her own past shows. She gathers all sorts of items indiscriminately—“Styrofoam, plastic,
cardboard, clothes, shoes, food things,” “Kotex, sandwiches, tools, anything”— and then assembles, sews, paints, and glues objects together to create props, masks, and costumes for a new piece.[31]

Went's creative process resembles the activity that Claude Lévi-Strauss analyzes as “bricolage.” A bricoleur is used to work with a limited stock of materials and tools and learns to “make do with the leftover products of earlier efforts, so that ends now come to play the role of means.”[32] The method of bricolage directly affects what Went herself describes as her “unschooled” artistic style, which features the do-it-yourself spontaneity, the childlike deconstruction and recombination of incompatible parts, the unexpected recycling of quotidian commodities, and the exaggerated retailoring of massive remnants. The overall effect amounts to an aesthetic of the grotesque: Went's objects are monstrous, kitsch, hyperbolic, transgressive, humorously coarse and lascivious, and blatantly theatrical.

Geoffrey Galt Harpham, in his illuminating book On the Grotesque, argues that the grotesque does not exist “in some positive form” but is rather a “species of confusion,” “defined and recognized in common usage by a certain set of obstacles to structured thought.”[33] Harpham's grotesque approaches Jarry's concept of the monstrous at the moment when our perception searches for but fails to find a satisfactory conception. This moment of failure expresses the frustration of our senses in reaching “structured thought,” capable of verbalizing the encounter with an excessive and often disturbing stimulation. Take, for example, a typical scenario from a Went performance: A woman in monkey suit opens a zipper to deliver an infant monkey-dummy, suckles the newborn in her fake blood for a minute, and the next minute squishes the baby-monkey to a pulp (Interview with Monkey Woman [1986]).[34] Are we to understand the scene as a representation of pedocidal rage? Or are we to see it as a sequence of abstract images that quote from yet simultaneously deride our habitual narrative impulse, for everything on stage seems too overtly artificial and playful to feign verisimilitude? We are likely to remain confused, because neither option seems entirely adequate—“though our attention has been arrested, our understanding is unsatisfied,” as Harpham reasons. The aesthetic of the grotesque then involves not solely formal properties that invite taxonomic confusion and interpretive difficulty but also our cognitive process itself. In Harpham's analysis, the sense of the grotesque depends largely on “the elements of understanding and perception, and the factors of prejudice, assumptions, and expectations… It is our interpretation of the form that matters, the degree to which we perceive the principle of unity that binds together the antagonistic parts. The perception of grotesque is never a fixed or stable thing, but always a process, a progression.”[35]

As Harpham's analysis makes clear, although the aesthetic of grotesque —— 296 —— monstrosity practiced by Went derives in large measure from her artistic style, it also exceeds her particular brand of formalism. Went's formal style provokes our expectations so as to transgress and to mock them. Likewise, she cultivates her aesthetic grotesquerie through a deliberately unsystematic methodology in order to evade predictability. This methodology, I suggest, is grounded in her nonhierarchical attitude toward art objects—the props, masks, costumes, and set pieces made for her performances—which she regards as her equals, her collaborators and coperformers, even her teachers. Byimplication, Went and her objects have mutually created one another. Inso much as she produces and animates objects in/for performance, those objects also teach her how to wear, use, place, and move in them, thereby contributing integrally to her performance personas and scenography.
Went's unsystematic creative process may be likened to a freeing of the self from egoistic preoccupation. The artist forfeits her control over her artworks, hence allowing her subconscious, her preverbal or tactile consciousness, to be let loose in an animistic environment. “The way I prepare for a show is often as raw, emotional and unintentional as the actual performance, and almost as messy,” says Went. In a functional sense, then, the improvisation process for a Went performance actually starts with her solitary work in a studio littered with materials; it extends to the stage populated by her monsters and stamped by her spectators' attention. What I analyzed earlier as the “anarchic democracy” characteristic of Jarry's world of monsters therefore governs both Went's creative and performative processes. Her experience of rawness and spontaneity has much to do with her lack of sovereignty over her material others. The emotional intensity discloses the extent of her belief in the inspirations of alien beings created by and now creating her. The messiness probably results from her frenetic pace, but it's also a sign of the want of boundaries and hierarchies between the artist and her artworks.

Went's aesthetic of the grotesque subjects her to a continuously volatile and frantic process. The first phase consists of a progressive encoding, in which she learns to collaborate with her objects. The second phase might be called a process of transcoding, or, in Went's term, one of translation: “I try to translate [the] information [communicated by my objects] into action, dialogue, music, emotion, et cetera during the course of the performance.” Such a ceaseless engagement with improvisation heightens the chaotic and festive feel of a Went performance, where all creatures, objects, and sounds are in thrall to spontaneous combustion; it also frequently renders the performance a surprise to its author. Went told me in our interview that she often doesn't remember a past performance and has to rely on the video document to know what exactly has happened. In other words, while Went translates her research into the instantaneous language of an impromptu performance, she shifts among her roles as a translator, a vehicle for translation, and the translated text. She allows her self to be dispersed, fragmented, and substituted by her material others—the figures being translated—amid a landscape of otherness. In Went's own words:

Sometimes I have felt manipulated by the very creatures that I have created, and that I am also just a tool carving out a very cluttered dreamscape. Other times I feel like I am in a trance. When that feeling carries over to the performance and I feel as if the audience is also entranced, then I feel a heightened awareness and I wonder if the masks and props have really taken possession and they are controlling the dream.

What is being “possessed” or “entranced” if not giving in to the force of otherness?

The primacy given to improvisation in a Went performance maintains her aesthetic of the grotesque; even more, it is intended to serve the artist's ideological preference for performance art as a transitory medium. “Since I believe that Performance Art is an art form of the moment,” Went explains, “I try not to rehearse the show, only walk through entrances, exits and costume changes if there are other performers in the piece. There is no exact plan.” In fact, before 1984, when Went started giving titles to her pieces for booking purposes, she did more than two hundred performances, most without documentation, not to mention a script. With Passion Container, a 1988 performance that involved an ensemble, Went began creating a script so as to prompt other performers about her “minioperas of the mind.” Went's “script” consists of a sequence of storyboards (fig. 37), linking her actors' names with images of costumes identified by functional labels, such as Toilet Water (for a
blue hospital gown) and Sewage Demon (for a rectangular box with a valve covered outlet). How these characters or monstrous caricatures move together is left to the whims of the performance itself.

Perhaps reflecting the sentiment characteristic of the decade when she started performing, Went's understanding of performance art resembles other 1970s artists' insistence on the ephemerality of this intermedium, a tendency deeply influenced by Allan Kaprow's theorization of live art. Went's remark on performance art as "an art form of the moment" might be heard as reiterating Kaprow's most unflinching definition of Happenings: "Happenings should be unrehearsed and performed by nonprofessionals, once only." Kaprow's statement reveals his investment in the elements of chance, transience, unreproducibility, and the nonart/lifelike qualities of Happenings. Without overstressing her "unschooled" (non)artistry, Went's conception of the performance medium echoes Kaprow's utopian and firmly anticommercial vision for action art. Kaprow further claims, "Happenings are events that,
put simply, happen… they appear to go nowhere and do not make any particular literary point…. Their form is open-ended and fluid; nothing obvious is sought and therefore nothing is won.”[42]

Not only is Kaprow's comment on Happenings an apt description for a playful Went performance, but it also presages Went's assertion about her indifference to thematic meaningfulness, “I do not intend to convey any message political or otherwise.”[43] Indeed, in a Went piece even topical references are adulterated in such a way as to appear anachronistic and mythical, just like any other quirky, supernatural, or subcultural references. In Alchemy of Monsters, a newspaper monster emerges in a hospital room, sporting a cruciform body made of cardboard pasted with newspapers. The top panel features a huge Anita Hill portrait (which is “old news” by 1991) and somewhere lower is a modified Nancy Reagan waving at the bylines in a feature story: “Kids and Toxic Waste” (which is not really news but perennial crisis). These journalistic images are collaged in a topsy-turvy fashion, so they look more like rococo wallpapers and leprous skins than social commentary—another evidence of the anarchic democracy in Went's performance universe, where every nonsense is of equal levity and weight.

While Went shares much of Kaprow's vision for live art, she is unique in her championship of entertainment. In Versel's Portrait of Johanna Went, Went states that her performance art is “first and foremost an entertainment” for herself. And if there is any message in her show, it is this: “Entertainment does not have to be pleasurable in order to be enjoyable.” Went's remark on the nonpleasurable quality of her brand of entertainment recalls her grotesque artistic style, which, as Harpham's theory suggests, tends to elicit from a viewer the contradictory response of affinity and antagonism, attraction and repulsion, rather than the monolithic gratification.[44] Just as she relates the difficulty of her art to an aesthetic dimension, so Went associates the enjoyment of her art to its formal attributes. In contrast to Kaprow's aversion to modernist formalism, Went locates the central interest of her anarchic theater precisely in her formalism. She warns her audience not to seek narrative meanings in her performance but to appreciate the “color, form, sound, movement, texture, and symbolism” embodied by her manipulation of objects.[45] Kaprow's emphasis on performance as an evanescent medium pointedly redresses a perceived condition of stagnancy in modernist aesthetics. Went's ideological conception of her meteoric art, on the contrary, reinforces her own aesthetic of the grotesque, which is, in essence, a formalism that hovers in between forms and categories.

Because of her devotion to executing her grotesque aesthetic at the extreme, Went's performance work contributes ingeniously to the time-space-action-performer-audience matrix of theatricality. Among the five elements, the least perturbed by Went's artistic intervention is that of the audience. Although Went's presentational style punctures the invisible fourth wall maintained by realistic illusionism, there is still a dividing line between the performer and the audience. In fact, the line must exist for the performer to break. Went has striven for a higher degree of interactivity between the spectacle and the spectator by throwing articles into the auditorium and by pushing some of the actions beyond the proscenium confines. In a
structural sense, however, her treatment of audience is not substantially different from that of most theater artists. Her club audience might be more tipsy and rowdy than the usual theater crop, but its functional position is similar to that of a theater audience.

While the audience remains a relatively neutral component in her art performance, Went does have a highly idiosyncratic take on the other four components. In my view, action takes precedence in Went's live art, molding her expressions of performer, space, and time accordingly. An offshoot of her style, the paradigmatic action in a Went performance verges on a particular aspect of the grotesque: the carnivalesque. In Mikhail Bakhtin's conception, the manifestation of the grotesque revolves around the movement of degradation. To decode such a downward motion in bodily terms is to exult at the functions specialized by "the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs; it therefore relates to acts of defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy, and birth. Degradation digs a bodily grave for a new birth; it has not only a destructive, negative aspect, but also a regenerating one." Scatological, carnal, destructive, and regenerative motions are the constant rhythms in Went's anarchic haven for monsters. These rhythmic and grotesque rituals—giving birth, licking blood off an enlarged dripping heart, shoveling Day-Glo porridge into all the holes in a dummy, conducting a sadomasochistic courtship, brandishing a butcher's knife next to a human-size turd, covering a giant penis with a tent-size condom—often occur haphazardly in Went's theater, becoming visual cacophony and audible caricature: a tenuously framed performance carnival threatening to burst the proscenium seam (fig. 38).

If the typical action in a Went performance recaptures the vigor of a medieval farce, then its carnivalesque activities are carried out by an array of maniacal characters. While the denizens roving on the Wentieth stage are rarely human, their figural expressions take after what Peter Stallybrass and Allon White annotate as the Bakhtinian grotesque body: "multiple, bulging, over or under-sized, protuberant and incomplete. The openings and orifices of this carnival body are emphasized, not its closure and finish. It is an image of impure corporeal bulk with its orifices (mouth, flared nostrils, anus) yawning wide and its lower regions (belly, legs, feet, buttocks and genitals) given priority over its upper regions (head, ‘spirit’, reason)." The stress on the grotesque body's propensity to stink, swell, leak, ooze, and overflow chimes with the recurrent tendencies in Went's actions, which, as the artist observes, usually involve "some kind of bloodletting and some kind of wet explosion toward the end."

The liquidity and looseness of the body imply its openness to exceed the boundary of the self and to take on qualities of others. Thus, Went's per-formance personas are predisposed to follow the morphological predilection of what I called homi-xenology, which entails the merging of a human figure
with bodies of others. The humorous Sewage Demon from Went's *Passion Container* exemplifies such a homi-xenological assemblage, whereby the legs of a human actor are fused with a cardboard chest and abdomen imitating a waste-disposal machine. The *body technology* utilized in a Went show involves finding equivalent kinetic modes for those hybrid creatures that exist nowhere but there.

Went's grotesque aesthetics manipulates the performer component (the unit that performs) in the theatrical matrix by radical alteration. Almost without exception, the performer in a Went piece is either a single protean monster or a group of shape changers—solo or ensemble, it comes as legion. Although these freakish personas are primarily constructed by their uncanny masks and costumes, these masks and costumes are not so much surface adornment as prosthetic bodies that stand for the flesh-and-blood, the organism-and-carapace, or the inner-vessel-and-outer-shell of Went's sundry monsters—biological or otherwise. My perception of uncanniness is provoked by the psychic discomfort of witnessing these fantastic prostheses moving on stage out of their own supra-or sub-human volition—their frenzied otherness throws me off-balance.

To a great extent, my anxiety is ensured and exacerbated by Went's design concept, one based on the principle of substitution to replace and displace her performer's existing human physique with her handmade prostheses of monstrosity.

Adding to the strategy of morphological substitution is the frequency of transformation on Went's stage. Her performer shifts from costume/persona to costume/persona, never standing a chance of getting stale or solid. The grotesque image, as Stallybrass and White emphasize, “is always in process, always becoming, it is a mobile and hybrid creature, disproportionate, exorbitant, outgrowing all limits, obscenely centered and off-balance, a figural and symbolic resources for parodic exaggeration and inversion.” Went ingeniously maximizes the mobility of her maniacal characters through formal devices. Most of her costumes are double-faced, displaying at least two monsters in one body—front and back; even her props are mutable: they alter in their theatrical functions—a cleaver turning into a fan into a pork chop—or they become the containers for other props—a plastic globe propped open so miniature human skulls can drop out of it.
Kinetic mobility also characterizes the sense of space constructed in Went's anarchic theater. Went has presented the majority of her performances on a small proscenium-like stage. Since her monsters, props, and set pieces are usually stupendous in size and imposing in their attention-grabbing abilities, Went's theatrical space often seems *claustrophobic* (too confining for what it contains), like a purgatory for her restless phantoms. But this purgatory is also *mercurial*; it shifts by the suggestions of its inhabitants. In *Alchemy of Monsters* the opening scenes move from an unholy church to a portable garden as the monsters change from mock clerics to floral goblins. During the performance, the backdrop structure is gradually turned around to become a freestanding wall of the damned, covered with painted faces in frontal glare or melancholy profile. As the wails of police sirens invade the last scene, the wall of the damned miraculously shifts its configuration and becomes animated, like a mammoth cruciform puppet or a scarecrow on wheels, deserting the stage to chase its own shadow.

It is by now commonplace to assume that our perceptions of space and time are intertwined. We find it harder to sustain a belief in absolute space and absolute time than to accept theoretical physicists' hypothesis that space and time are "dynamic quantities: when a body moves, or a force acts, it affects the curvature of space and time—and in turn the structure of spacetime affects the way in which bodies move and forces act. Space and time not only affect but also are affected by everything that happens in the universe." While I make no claim that Went follows the scientific rules of nature in formulating her ideas of space and time, Stephen Hawkins's explanation serves as an incisive comment on the interconnected spatial and temporal expressions in Went's frenzied theatrics.

The carnivalesque action, as mentioned earlier, is the center of gravity in Went's theatrical universe; it creates the patterns of energy that mobilize her performer and affect her performative sense of space and time. Her theatrical space—as contradictory and transgressive as her carnivalesque action—is both claustrophobic and free-ranging, seemingly enclosed within a pictureframe stage, yet mutable in its geomythological contents and penetrating in its lunges into the audience space (through the performer's assaulting voice and movement). Went's performative interpretations of time have a similar oxymoronic bent. Corresponding to her claustrophobic space, the course of time in a Went performance stays in a constant state of being recycled. As her phantasmagoric spectacles do not follow a linear order, there is no progressive sense of time to gauge the duration and note the passage of an event. Her monsters come and go, without obvious cause or effect. Their unmeasurable mobility thus perpetuates the perception of timelessness, for time has reached the point of equilibrium with the homogeneity of fruitless motions.

But the perceptual indolence of time in Went's universe tells only half the story, like one side of a double-faced monster. *Alchemy of Monsters* is actually an exception in Went's corpus in that the stage becomes empty with the exit of the scarecrow monster. Most of her other performances end with an extremely cluttered stage—an almost inevitable result considering the erratic way that Went puts up a show: "I take all of these things to where I'm going to do a show, and the musicians come and play whatever it is they want to play, and then I sing anything that comes out of my mouth. There's lots of blood and messy things and then I fall down and it's over." Went's remark accurately describes the action trajectory of a typical piece, say, *Knife Boxing* (1984), the first piece she titled. The performance starts with Went—in a mask with several...
heads sprouting like wild mushrooms and a pair of boxing shorts—pulling out a massive tampon from a vagina wall, passing it on to the audience, and continuing to pull out immense quantities of guts to scatter them around her. She proceeds to disembowel a dummy as the tampon is transported back to stage. A menacing snake appears out of nowhere, spilling blood everywhere it lurks. Went then punches a sandbag until it bursts open to emit a multitude of paper balls (magnified sperms or pure trash?). The performance ends with her fainting in the mess she has just made.

Time, therefore, does move forward as well in Went's performance, for the rate of chaos increases as she expends her energy. “Entropy is time's arrow,” exclaims British astronomer Sir Arthur Eddington.[52] The exclamation indicates the essential link between the law of entropy and the irreversible forward motion of time; it also adds a terminological footnote to what I've observed as the increase of random disorder in Went's theatrical universe. “Entropy” was the name coined by the German physicist Rudolf Clausius to signify his measure of the increasing incapacity of energy to do work. Exulted as the Second Law of Thermodynamics, it posits that the loss of useful energy is inevitable during exchanges of heat energy between systems of matter. By extension, all systems tend to move toward greater confusion and disorder as time passes, due to the amassing of unusable energy. This tendency toward greater disorder in turn gives a temporal direction to events. We know that time is moving forward because our energy is moving from an available to an unavailable state. Moreover, “the amount of real time expended is a direct reflection of the amount of energy used up.”[53] With the irreversible decrease of available energy for work, it is then possible to anticipate the end of time when the universe reaches “a temperature equilibrium in which disorder is at a maximum and useful energy sources no longer exist to support life or even motion.”[54] Entropy is then the science of time in Went's perpetual monstrous sideshow.

The last image in Knife Boxing graphically represents what the physicist speculates as the “heat death of the universe” in which no further occurrence of work is possible. The performer lies prostrate amid a dump of waste materials accumulated throughout the show. As Wheaton's head-splitting tape looped noise music drifts to silence, the cyclical movement of time that has driven Went's exuberant carnival spirals down to cradle/bury a depleted figure in entropic space-time.

Symbiotic Permutations: O'Brien, O'Brien, and Roden

Now it is the time of night
That the graves, all gaping wide,
Every one lets forth his sprite
In the church-way paths to glide.
And we fairies, that do run
By the triple Hecate's team
From the presence of the sun,
Following darkness like a dream…

—William Shakespeare, A Midsummer Night's Dream
Puck is relaxed and cheerful when he utters these lines. He has just helped his King Oberon obtain the Indian changeling from Titania through a trick that has bewitched the Fairy Queen's vision; he has removed Bottom's ass head and restored the weaver's humanity; he has repaired the mispairing among the two Athenian couples and sent them off to happiness. He has performed these mischievous and remedial tasks all within the span of a night—last night. Now darkness has descended again and Puck anticipates the unfolding of another dream—one made for frolic and not for toil, for leisure and not for work. While stretching his elfin body for a night of pleasure, Puck offers a poetic narrative that simultaneously sheds light on and obscures the nature of the fairy world. As Puck muses, the fairy world comes alive with the triple dream of the triformed Hecate—of Proserpina singing the blues in Hades, Diana circling around the woods on earth, and Luna gazing from her moonsphere in the heavens—and it fades like the dew with the ascending sun. Puck nevertheless fails to make it clear that the fairy world he inhabits—dreamlike and magical as it is—is also a miniature replica of the human world. Like the Athenian court (and, for that matter, the Elizabethan court), the fairy world operates on a stringent political hierarchy, with the king and queen on top, and their entourages of courtiers, minions, jesters, and servants following in descending order. Moreover, the fairy world is just as conditioned by eros and strife, by lies, flatteries, intrigues, and manipulations as is the human world. The difference between the two, then, lies not in their intrinsic nature/culture, but in their extrinsic attributes: the fairies are much smaller, much faster, more restless in habit and temperament, and far more skillful in the art of enchantment.

“We are interested in investigating the potential for enchantment in the art of performance,” reads the artistic statement from Toti Mercadante O'Brien, John O'Brien, and Steve Roden. To me, enchantment is a key term that not only proclaims the three artists' intention but also captures the evocative atmosphere of their performance world. Byforegrounding enchantment—an aesthetic property almost obliterated from contemporary art—as a core interest in their performance collaboration, the trio's remark harks back to the equally forgotten world of the fairies. My assertion, however, like Puck's poetry, manages to half-reveal and half-conceal the ethereal complexity and offhanded lyricism of the trio's performance art.

Like the fairy trail, the trio's art performance traverses the realm of moonhaunted illusions. As the fairy world exists both within and outside Shakespeare's Athens, the trio's fabulous (fablelike) art is marked by a sense of other(worldli)ness that separates it from the solar/secular preoccupation of contemporary art, within which the artists take up their residencies. While the trio's performances often conjure up the fairyland as an impressionistic backdrop, they are never wholly absorbed by the common wonders and feudal politics reigning in Shakespeare's enchanted forest. To the extent that the fairy nation mimics the human's imperial statehood, the trio's art actually stands at equidistance from the spectral and the mortal worlds. Or, to be more exact, the performance personas of O'Brien, O'Brien, and Roden resemble the changelings within the fairyland. Having been physically and psychically whisked off to another zone of being, they are no longer entirely human, yet their residual humanities still set them apart from the rest of the fairies.

Puck's verses may offer another clue to the trio's near-affinity for the spriteful ethos. “And we fairies, that do run…/ From the presence of the sun, / Following darkness like a dream.”
Darkness quickens the fairies and twilight sets them in flight. The fairies lie dormant while daylight lingers on and they vanish with the mere hint of sunlight. The dusk is then the embryonic hour for the fairies while the dawn their refugee time. Contrary to the fairies' discomfort with anything less than what John Milton calls “darkness visible,” John O'Brien suggests that “twilight”—when things are not very clear and the human brain is physiologically transforming in its struggle to see—is “a good analogy” for the trio's performance; it is the metaphorical state in which their work resides. “You can actually see more clearly in the darkness than in the dusk,” O'Brien adds. “In the night, there are monsters. In the day, there are monsters. But in the twilight, you don't know.” Whereas the fairies depend on the sense of distinctiveness in the all-encompassing darkness to navigate their nocturnal excursions, the sine qua non for the trio's art lies in the potential confusion, ambivalence, and equivocality associated with a constantly adjusting vision. The performances created by O'Brien, O'Brien, and Roden thrive precisely at those ambiguous states—the dusk and the dawn—from which the fairies must retire. Their art is then made of very different stuff from the magic of the fairies. For the three artists situate their collaborative performances literally on the pre-fairy (the dusk) and the post-fairy (the dawn) stages.

Consider these visions in a terrace filled with naturally grown and built objects.

There are two moons, one in the sky and the other suspended behind a large translucent canvas with a square metal frame and resin-filled screen. Or perhaps there are three moons: the third one appears as a flat, round surface, slightly slanted toward the front, lying a few feet away from the screen. Three human-shaped figures emerge from behind the bushes to step onto the lunar stage. Posing their bodies individually in stylized gestures, they resemble stopmotion puppets in a live drawing class. The three then join their bodies to create a sequence of corporeal signs that look (to me) like letters from the English alphabet: two standing figures join their heads with a third in the middle—“A”; two vertical lines align parallel with a third on the ground—“U”; and so on (fig. 39, p. 311).

In the next segment, the three are divided into a solo and a duet. The solitary figure starts singing in a pure and high-pitched voice from behind the screen; his/its voice cruises with some recorded electronic music that seems to flow from the second moon, like a seagull sailing above invisible but calming tides. The duet proceeds as an ornate tug-and-pull amid patches of shadowy branches cast by the tree-hugging lights. Keeping their bodies close to the ground, the couple marks a vacillating horizontal quick-line on the grass. The suggestion of alphabetic units in the last segment links their dancerly motions to linguistic games. Are they signifiers engaged in a syntactic wrestle or figures of speech striving for rhetorical elegance? Are they neologisms hoping to make sense? Are they grammaticians parsing ill-conceived sentences? All of the above, it seems. Another segment reinforces this chain of conjectures: two dancers—one loquacious and the other silent—gradually unfold and fold a lengthy stretch of white quilt from the west side of the plateau to the east. While performing his rolling task, the loquacious dancer utters a string of speech that sounds like a mixture of English, Italian, and other, unintelligible languages, while an acrobat keeps tumbling backward on the quilt. Are they spirits of a manuscript editing itself on a scroll?
group, the title of this performance fulfills at least three functions: (1) it leaves a trace of the trio's creative process particular to the given project; (2) it conveys what I might call the group's “twilight aesthetics”; (3) it proposes a referential framework for the project that broadly informs the artists' creative investigation and subtly orients the spectators' perceptions and interpretations.

The developmental trajectory of Linglot reveals how the three artists have created their collaborative projects since 1995. “Usually it's a place that invites us to do something,” says John O'Brien. “On the basis of that, Toti and I will start talking and usually involve Steve right away. We begin to throw things around and in the process of that we develop a theme and out of that we find a title.” The trio's collaborative performance is spurred by commissions, which, in the beginning at least, were mostly based on the reputation of their individual careers prior to their joint ventures. The conditions of the commission provide the artists with the impetus for planning their presentation, which is in essence a broadly construed response to a specific occasion. From this impetus, then, the trio extracts the theme of performance and decides on a title that resonates with the planned action. The title serves as a record for both the circumstances of commission and the initial process of creative research; it also becomes a catalyst for further creative development in rehearsals.

The piece I described above, for example, was the second and the live performance version of a project initially produced in video format: Linglot (terrace version), commissioned by the Laband Art Gallery of Loyola Marymount College in 1998. The curator at Laband had planned to include the trio's artwork in an exhibition that focused on people influenced by Italian art and broadly covered those who use different languages. As the O'Briens are multilingual (fluent in Italian, English, and French) and Roden has always incorporated language as an element in his music and painting, they decided to do a work that draws on letters from the English and Italian alphabets, turning their own bodies into bodies of alphabets. The title Linglot served to anchor the artists' imagination.

How does the signifier Linglot illuminate the trio's twilight aesthetics? “Usually the title is a hybrid word,” John O'Brien explains. “It's intelligible to many, but it's not immediately translatable.” Like the temporal span of twilight, when the source of light exists in hastened flux and pigments of color keep losing their visual distinctiveness, the neologism Linglot melds divergent elements in a vibrant continuum. The first syllable of this fusion word has a readily discernible etymology from the Latin lingua, meaning “language.” It also evokes related words such as “lingua” (a tongue or tongue-shaped organ), “lingo” (language that is strange because it is foreign or specialized), and “lingua franca,” which generally indicates a hybrid language used as a medium of communication between people of different languages and, in its capitalized form, signifies a mixture of Italian with French, Greek, Arabic, Turkish, and Spanish, historically used in the Levant. The second syllable—“lot”—may indicate an object used in making a choice by chance or a plot of land. Thus, Lin glot, in its most accessible connotations, suggests a series of linguistic games directed by chance and improvisation as well as a language play that interacts with a space (e.g., a performance site such as a terrace). But it's important to note that neither interpretation is definitive. There are many other possible readings that I omit here because they are too elusive, too fractured, or too indeterminate, hence not readily speakable.
What I have gone through in deciphering the word *Linglot* is a miniature reflection of what the three artists have undergone in creating their performances. Roden likens their creative process to a linguistic exercise: “It's like taking a word and writing down its definition, then all its connotations, then everything it relates to, then everything it suggests, then historically how it has been used, so what you are left with is the presences of the word, rather than only its specific definition.” Roden's comment reveals that the trio's twilight aesthetics—however chancy and amorphous—actually follows an underlying structure, which, with *Linglot*, involves established and recombined linguistic conventions. His preference for hermeneutic ambiguity recalls the trio's interest in those intervals that we loosely delimit as dusk or dawn. The semantic multivalence of *Linglot*, along with its symbolic, material, and sonic “presences,” signals the plurality of visual interpretations with which we tend to approach objects obscured by the shifting twilight. The trio's collaborative art capitalizes on such multiplicity of perspectives afforded by the fleeting gradations of light. As Toti O'Brien relates, “A key to all our works is that there is light, but there is also darkness coming in. You see things in a way but also in another way.”

Although the title can neither dictate the artists' scopes of research nor fix the meaning of a given performance, the nuanced linguistic ramifications of *Linglot* inspired both the compositional motifs and the formal vocabularies of the initial commissioned video performance. The video performance subsequently became the prototype for three live performance variants, *Linglot (terrace version too)*, *Poly Linglot1*, and *Poly Linglot2*, performed respectively in the spring (at Joan Hugo's Terrace in L.A.), summer (at Santacangelo dei Teatri in Santacangelo, Italy), and fall (at the Brewery project in L.A.) of 1999. All these pieces are similar in choreographic structure, technical effects, and props, but they also diverge from each other, like different versions of texts drafted on a model outline.

The video performance starts with a shot of John O'Brien's tongue (lingua), which displays a sequence of his body gestures that simulate the alphabetic signs. The same sequence is repeated later by Roden (fig. 40) and by Toti O'Brien. In addition to its literal material presence, the tongue is also featured as an organ for eating and speaking. An action segment shows the individual artist eating a piece of drawing paper using only his/her mouth, teeth, and tongue. Another segment consists of the three artists respectively and sequentially pronouncing a chain of seemingly freely associated words (linked by chance) in many different languages, practicing their lingua franca, which sounds to my ears like coded lingo. Exploration, testing, experimentation, playing, and practicing are the recurrent kinetic motifs in the piece, imitating the frequent tasks related to the production of written and spoken languages.

So far my reading for the *Linglot* series is profoundly influenced by my linguistic analysis of the title. The title becomes the lens through which I view the performative motionscapes that extend before me, while I chart my own narrative itinerary into them. I enjoy superimposing my reasoned vision upon these uncertain sights in order to iron out the incongruous details that fail to support my equation. I see two men and a woman playing in purple-black light on a terrace, throwing paper balls that gradually unwind into ribbons, rippling with purplish sheen. Because of my preconceived desire for a coherent story, I deny what I see and instantaneously translate the human performers into nouns, verbs, adjectives, and participles, announcing them as “illuminated manuscripts.” But at the same time I am aware of my peculiar denial; I doubt there is an equation to coordinate all these ambiguous and multivalent actions. Am I not simultaneously guided and tricked by the title of this
performance? After all, I could just as well interpret the two men and a woman frolicking and toiling under the moon as fairies, knowing full well that they are three artists engaged in a well-rehearsed yet partially improvised performance. I suspect, however, that all my wondering and deliberations are cunningly provoked by the trio's twilight aesthetics, for people and things appear together with their shadowy doubles under fuzzy light. Do I judge these shadows as false when they assert their own visual presence and command my optical field? Do I call the moon a liar when it shifts its phases every so often right before my eyes in a distance unreachable by my verifying touch? My imperfection enriches the perceptual plays.

“We tend to have language-imbedded structure that wedisarticulate,” says John O'Brien. “We use more time-misplacement and not a completely invented language,” adds Toti O'Brien. If there is a methodology to the trio's twilight aesthetics, it is the combined techniques of disarticulation and (time) misplacement that the three artists have developed in various projects.
Disarticulation suggests a constructed discrepancy between enunciated sounds and their habitual senses, thereby causing a cognitive drift in the audience's understanding of the action. Time-misplacement or misplacement through temporal manipulation locates such an act of disarticulation in the duration it takes to enunciate the sound—a daily phrase such as “It doesn't matter” variously hastened and prolonged into “I—td-oes——ntmatte——r.” Both techniques, in their immediate usage, address the aural environment that the trio creates in performance. These techniques are also applied conceptually to other areas of performance, such as the weaving of narrative threads and the choreography. Thus, in a comprehensive way, these techniques establish the foundation for the theatrical matrix activated by the trio's work.

There are five consistent and intersecting elements in the aural environment characteristic of the trio's performances: silence, speech, existing and produced sounds, a bed of prerecorded electronic music composed by Roden, and improvised songs/vocal works planted sporadically in this bed. Silence is produced by a speechless state of physical motions, so it is never utterly soundless. The trio's silent mimes are frequently invaded by the existing sounds in the open-air sites they often choose or by the sounds of the physical tasks they perform. A segment in Linglot (terrace version too) shows each artist carrying a long pole with bells attached to its edges. While the performers manipulate the props in silence, the poles themselves become musical instruments that disarticulate the silence. The ethereal jingling of the bells is further interrupted and displaced by an (uninvited) police helicopter flying overhead. In the trio's performance, the speech used is usually a haphazard mixture of English, Italian, and French, delivered at ordinary or distorted paces; it functions more like a cog than the engine in an overall sound machine that also includes Roden's sonic/musical compositions and improvisations, both of which incorporate radically modified everyday sounds and remembered melodies.

Disarticulation and misplacement metaphorically applied influence the narrative design for the trio's performances. As my reading of Linglot illustrates, this narrative design utilizes the title of a given piece as its inaugural element, which often mis/directs the spectator into a certain frame of perceptions regarding the subsequent action. Take Husk (1998), a performance enacted once in Barnsdall Municipal Art Gallery in Hollywood. Unlike Linglot, the title Husk is not a neologism. The denotations of “husk” include the dry outer covering of an ear of maize or of some fruits and nuts; the worthless external part of something; an insect's cocoon; and bronchitis affecting farm animals, causing them to cough in a husky—dry, hoarse, lowpitched, rough—voice. The performance starts with the illuminated shadow of a seated Roden singing in a smooth, high-pitched, and drawn out voice behind two hinged screens. His serene visual/aural presence is not exactly that of a hog suffering from husk. Such corruption of the lexical repertoire of “husk” continues with the incorporation of animal imagery. Wild rather than tamed/domesticated animals feature prominently in Husk. This narrative thread misplaces the core meaning of “husk” by exaggerating a subsidiary aspect (animals), hence insinuating a story based on one of the word's semantic tangents. The performers' costume designs and choreographed behaviors establish and reinforce the animal imagery. These thematic, visual, and movement components in constant interactions create two superb episodes in Husk.

In one episode, each performer takes up an ingeniously sculpted costume, which has hitherto been lying on the ground as part of the scenic installation. John O'Brien suits his left arm and
upper body in a contraption made of steel and brownish weblike fabric. Toti O'Brien carries her symmetrically designed, light blue, elliptical covering like an oversize hat or a full-blown kite. Roden wears his purple-tinted, bone-stretched structure on his shoulder as if he were lifting a tent—decorated with octopus legs. The appearances of these costumes and the ways the performers wear and move in them suggest that they function like exoskeletal shells for mollusks—surely not some worthless castoffs, but crucial to the animals' survival and entertainment.

In another episode, the three performers are each hidden inside a two-foothigh, urnlike covering made of interwoven and imbricated brown paper. They move in synchronicity, like three color-and-shape-coordinated mounds. Suddenly their uniformity is broken by their curious hands, which stretch out from built-in slits/pockets on their cocoons and tentatively explore the air, ground, and companions nearby. This humorous episode evokes the innocence of the animal world, where leisure and work, learning, hunting, mating, and playing are often conjoined. The disarticulation of “husk” through linguistic misplacement thus ushers in a delightful series of homi-xenological dramas.

Disarticulation and misplacement employed as kinesic principles add to the general sense of strangeness that the trio introduces to their movements. With every piece the group has done so far, a subliminal but specific narrative structure is discernible early on in the performance. This narrative structure—be it the linguistic terrain of Linglot or the zoological expanse of Husk—also functions as a particular formal typology within which the artists select various kinetic modes for the given piece. While these kinetic modes become reiterated throughout the performance, they are simultaneously subject to the process of disarticulation and misplacement. In the triple cocoon scene from Husk, for example, the three artists proceed to disarticulate the illusion of their selfsame bondage by standing up from their hunched-down positions (fig. 41, p. 317). In a short while, they husk their shells to play with these conelike but collapsible objects like toys. Thus, by the mere suggestion of their kinesic attitudes and misplaced costume pieces, the performers evolve from chrysalises, to shellfish, to bipeds with scaled upper torso to Homo sapiens exploring newly invented tools/toys. The zoological structure in Husk is then both pursued and derailed, resulting in a kinetic collage of multiple fragmented narrative snatches that never quite cohere but rather coexist in an out-of-kilter fashion.

Strangeness is a principal effect in the art of enchantment. The trio's twilight aesthetics and their techniques of disarticulation and misplacement resonate with the three artists' interest in “investigating the potential for enchantment in the art of performance.” I hold that the trio's investigation, as it concerns the intrinsic attributes of the performance medium, defines the theatricality embodied by their works. To me, the central element in the trio's theatrical matrix is the performer, which, in this case, comprises three artists of varying training and artistic proclivities. Their collaboration determines the distinctive and variable ways in which the group approaches the other components of the theatrical matrix.

This collaboration is based, in John O'Brien's phrase, on “elective affinity,” which means in practical terms that the three members involved have chosen to work together on an equal artistic footing. The success of their working relationship depends on the artists' willingness and ability to find an aesthetic common ground without compromising their differences. The group's signature twilight aesthetics well exemplifies how such a common ground is found. John O'Brien approaches the twilight state of ambiguity from a linguistic angle, because he is
keen on utilizing language to create misunderstanding and confusion, which was actually the basis of his solo “language performance” in the late 1980s. Creating confusion, however, is not a motivation for Toti O'Brien. Instead, she pursues this line of work because she sees more sense in the apparent confusion when one loses the habitual way of looking at things. Roden shares the two's resistance to “one simple specific meaning of a thing” from a formal standpoint, because he prefers “presenting information that is detached from its source as a kind of pure poetic inspiration.” Their aesthetic and ideological differences, then, converge at a midpoint where abstraction, nonlinear structure, and multivalence meet. They further cultivate this midpoint as the volatile grounding for a symbiotic coexistence in performance works.

The way O'Brien, O'Brien, and Roden's art products formally mirror their evolving working relationships fascinates me. Their first joint performance was *Ippirati* (1995), for which Roden composed and performed soundwork as a musician from the sideline. Later, he accepted the O'Briens' invitation to participate more fully and became the third performer, weaving in and out of sound and movement as either a solo component or part of a trio. In keeping with their individual strengths and preferences, the three are nominally assigned decision-making responsibility for certain areas: Toti O'Brien for choreography, movement, and costumes; John O'Brien for sculpture and set installation; Steve Roden for sound. As their collaboration has developed, they have become much more relaxed in guarding their own areas from the others' intervention. Their working relationships are materialized in two performative ways: (1) the hybrid confluence of visual, spatial, kinetic, and sonic dimensions, combining their divergent disciplines; (2) the choreographic patterns incorporating their different levels of kinetic expertise, mixing sophisticated and highly refined dancesteps with simple movements made deliberately awkward, childlike, and clownish.

Except for the similar creative process developed by the trio, there is no predetermined course for the three artists to navigate the theatrical matrix. As John O'Brien remarks, they do not work with a formal core but rather allow themselves to notice and accept “a given trajectory… dictated by desire.” A common desire among the three artists is to remain mutable. John O'Brien describes himself as a restless person who resents repeating things. Toti O'Brien likes to approach their performance pieces as a continuous body of work with little repetition but much variation. Roden enjoys “re-learning things rather than redoing them.” As a result, the trio has never staged the same performance twice in a given site. Instead, they put a premium on improvisation as well as on the expected and aleatory circumstances specific to each project.

The audience remains the least problematized aspect in the trio's theatrical matrix. Since all their performances are open to the public for free, the audience is positioned as the recipients of the artists' gift of performance. In *Somnia* (1996), a piece staged in Palazzo Ducale in Gubbio, Italy, however, the artists involved all the spectators in a dance finale that circled around the palace courtyard. The line that divides the makers and the recipients of the gift no longer holds in this instance.

Distinct from the relative stability of the audience's role, the other three theatrical components vary from project to project. As examined earlier, the trio's evocative title for each project forecasts the kind of action that will transpire during performance. Modification rules
supreme, however. The trio revises the action score to fit a specific site even when they perform the sametitled project in different places (which are usually located in different cities or continents). Likewise, the sense of space is informed by the interaction between the found and the constructed environments. The given condition of the presentational venue is both joined with and transformed by large-scale set pieces and dividing screens. The sense of time follows two arcs: the arc of the episodic structure and that of the musical/sound structure. It therefore wavers in tempos and durations, like the time for fables, measurable by the tasks fulfilled, and the time for songs.

And the time for dreams. A woman lays her head on the knee of a man, whose head rests on the shoulder of another man (fig. 42). They seem to have fallen into deep slumber—three bodies of verydifferent sizes and shapes making a molehill. A breeze passes and they wake up. The diversion of (in)Som nia, they realize. A man picks up his flute for a midnight melody. Another man circles around some wooden sticks that he just placed on the ground. The woman, in her late pregnancy, lifts up a big bag and pours out its fallen leaves, letting them rustle like busy fairies.

**Thermokinetic Syncopation: Oguri and Renzoku**

Three crouched figures in trenchcoats move haltingly toward the edge of a room, tracing the radiating path painted black and red diagonally across the floor. They arch their backs to such a degree that they look like home-grown snails hesitating to crawl. When they complete about a quarter of the path, they abruptly lift their lower bodies and flip open the trenchcoats, revealing their naked buttocks and bare legs in dressy high heels. Next to their bodies in humorous arrest is a square mat made of blown-up Japanese newspapers featuring the headline “Sankai Juku,” the Paris-based Japanese Butoh company that made headlines when one of its members accidentally fell to death from a skyscraper during a 1985 performance in Seattle.[58] The three trenchcoat figures are dancers from Renzoku, performing *Fu Ru I (sifi)*#2 … *Behind Eyeball* (1995) at the chapel turned warehouse theater La Boca a decade after the Sankai Juku accident (fig. 43).[59]

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The sound of steps walking away mixed with that of water flowing evokes a mood of idyllic suspense, while meandering dry ice lit in red turns the State Playhouse's proscenium stage into a misty landscape. At different corners of the stage pause six black umbrellas, their full-blown surfaces facing the audience. Almost imperceptibly, the umbrellas start to crinkle and move. A finger sticks out from behind an umbrella to tug at its edge. The stage lighting brightens. I notice more umbrellas slowly collapsing and more fingers coming out to play: fingers as faces, searching for signs of intelligent life everywhere. The severity of the umbrellas' minimalist movements contrasts sharply with the sensuality of the flirtatious fingers. Just as I become used to these dialogues between the collapsible plastic skins and the vivacious digits in organic forms, I am startled by a leg thrusting upward from a ruffled umbrella—the leg looks inordinately huge and brutal compared to the Lilliputian fingers. The scene comes from Renzoku's *Behind Eyeball* (1995), a radically altered “sequel” to the version described above.[60]

Oguri is cocooned in a piece of blue plastic canvas and lying quite still on the concrete-paved courtyard next to La Boca. Knowing that he always begins dancing before a performance formally begins (say, with the arrival of spectators and the lighting change), I heed his stillness as intently as I do the simple *ikebana* of a white lily in a glass vase lying a few feet away from him. Inside La Boca Jamie Burris, in a white shirt that hangs on her body and a
pair of oversized high heels, staggers through the makeshift audience seats. She carries a black umbrella that covers her entire face; her legs twist outward in a ganimata ("bowlegged crouch") stance, a typical Butoh technique that allows the weight to hang on the outer sides of the two legs, rendering the inside of the legs upward and the entire body earthbound. I am drawn to Burris's agonizing motions only to discover that another sheltered spectacle is happening in an inner chamber of La Boca. The chamber is lit eerily by the bluish light radiating from a silent television set that stands sideways on the ground. Sherwood Chen in whiteface and regular shirt and pants stands staring into the void. Expressionless, Chen has a metal bucket resting on top of his right shoulder. He lets the bucket slant ever so slightly until the water in it trickles and splashes to the ground. Before I shift my concentration, Oguri has crawled out of his cocoon and into the central playing arena of La Boca. His face is buried in a dipper, whose long handle looks like an extra limb protruding from his largely bare body. Burris has lost the umbrella but she carries on her former posture as if her memory were locked in an incorrigible habit. A similar inertia has held Chen captive: his bucket has crashed to the ground, but his arms remain raised in the same position. The desolate landscape that surrounds these opening episodes of the stream of consciousness (1998), however, will shift drastically by the end of the piece, when all three dancers stick out their tongues, joyously tasting the air filled with Japanese pop music—candies in ether!

Although Butoh is the obvious reference to Oguri's work as a choreographer, his career in L.A. has maintained an ambivalent relationship with this Japanese postwar dance form that has become increasingly popular among Western artists and audiences in the past two decades. When Oguri and Renzoku began presenting dances at La Boca in 1993, its two founders used the term Body Weather Laboratory (BWL) to propagate their aesthetics and methodology. References to Butoh were given obliquely through "circumstantial" evidence such as the news item about Sankai Juku pasted on the floor or the ganimata gait, the white makeup, and the overall somatic grotesquerie. More recently, Oguri has collaborated with numerous non-Butoh-specific artists to produce two large-scale performances: with the musician Shane Cadman and his Illustrious Theater Orchestra for A Flame in the Distance (1997), and with the Buddhist priest/Kyudo archer/performance artist Hirokazu Kosaka and the Israeli composer Yuval Ron for In Between the Heartbeat (1998). These works are multidisciplinary and more pronounced in their matter-of-fact coexistence with a technological culture. Ironically, however, as his work has diverged from the predominantly anti-technocracy ethos of Butoh, Oguri and Steinberg have found it necessary to mention BWL's affinity with Butoh as a promotional tactic to draw a larger audience. This ironic shift in the group's aesthetic identification certainly reflects the increasing draw of Butoh as an audience magnet, although in interviews Oguri is more eager to differentiate his dance from Butoh than to align with it.

Butoh is nevertheless the fountainhead from which Oguri's art both derives and diverts. Oguri's career as a solo artist began in 1984 by enacting concept-based happenings on the streets of Tokyo. He was fascinated with the famed Anti-Art (Han-geijutsu) performances of Hi Red Center and its cofounder Genpei Akasegawa's highly publicized trial in 1964. Akasegawa was convicted of forging counterfeit thousand-yen notes, even though those notes were only printed on one side. Identifying himself as "a Happening artist," Akasegawa turned his trial into a quasi-art exhibition by doing sample performances and inviting many artists and critics to appeal on his behalf. His renegade spirit was shared by another iconic personality, Tatsumi Hijikata, the secretive and charismatic artist/dandy who, together with another master
dancer/choreographer, Kazuo Ohno, founded Ankoku Butoh (the stamping dance of utter darkness).\cite{65} Unaware of Ohno's practice, Oguri took a few dance workshops with Hijikata. Then, through Hijikata's recommendation, he began formal training with Min Tanaka, who was the principal dancer for Hijikata's choreographic work *Ren-ai Butoh-Ha Teiso: Foundation of the Dance of Love* (1984).\cite{66} Tanaka had been conducting a series of exercises in workshops called Body Weather Laboratory since 1978. In 1981 he founded the company Mai-Juku, in which Oguri participated between 1985 and 1990. Thus, Oguri's direct artistic lineage stems more from Tanaka's BWL than Hijikata's Ankoku Butoh. Tanaka, however, prefers to identify himself as "the legitimate son of Tatsumi Hijikata."\cite{67} There is then a certain connection—aesthetic or otherwise—between BWL and Ankoku Butoh.

The history of Butoh in Japan, as Steven Durland observes, has mirrored that of performance art in the United States and Europe.\cite{68} Because of its visceral abandon and taboo subject matter, Butoh's early reputation was intertwined with moral controversy and political rebelliousness; it won over a coterie of art audiences but antagonized conservative officials and upset the general public. *Kinjiki (Forbidden Color, 1959)*, Hijikata's first major performance, which introduced "Butoh" into the Japanese cultural lexicon, explicitly portrays homosexual/pedophilic passion. A young boy (played by Kazuo Ohno's then-teenage son Yoshito) jams a live chicken in between his thighs simulating sex and an older man (Hijikata) strangles the chicken to death over the boy's prone body.\cite{69} The silent dance ends in pitch darkness with the sound of running footsteps from the fleeing boy and the pursuing man.

An adaptation of Yukio Mishima's novel, *Kinjiki* might well be a vehicle for the dancer/choreographer to express his own forbidden desire. Hijikata's vision for Ankoku Butoh nonetheless found sympathy among Japanese artists and intellectuals because he strove to locate the seeds of this extreme art form in what he claimed to be the unique "Japanese bodies," revealed—as he saw them—in the whites of the turned-up eyeballs of the blind, the curved backs and hips of farmers, the clumsy hands and bent legs of old people, the bad carriage and shrunk limbs of deformed individuals.\cite{70} While his claim for the Japanese essence of Butoh is debatable, Hijikata's aspiration to create an indigenous art agreed with the contemporary "Anpo spirit," which responded to the sense of being defeated by the force of U.S. hegemony with revolt against authority, establishment, and all forms of orthodox Japanese modernism and Westernization.\cite{71} The critic Tono Yoshiaki called these conscientious rebels driven by the Anpo spirit the "post-Hiroshima generation": "The rubble, the smell of death and the social confusion of the postwar era had constituted their everyday environment. The ruins were their playground and this state of absolute void became necessarily the foundation for their art."\cite{72}

Fed by Hijikata's interest in the primal forces of nature (hunger, lust, disease, aging, death) borne by the "Japanese body," Butoh was, I suggest, originally a paradigmatic post-Hiroshima art. Its subsequent development, however, veered away from Hijikata's obsession with violence, decadence, marginality, and dark eroticism, further jettisoning his anti-West attitude. Butoh quickly turned into an intercultural postmodern dance/performance style, partially through the influence of Ohno, whose own eclecticism and frequent international tours inspired many Westerners to study Butoh and spawned schools of Butoh-genic practitioners throughout the world. The international cachet stamped on this grotesque kinetic style has in turn persuaded the Japanese public and dignitaries that Butoh is indeed an art form to merit serious attention. Therefore, as Durland points out, "butoh now seems to exist in and of itself in Japan, not as a subset of dance," similar to performance art, which "went from
being a disturbing subset of visual art to more or less a ‘traditional’ discipline in its own right.” Moreover, the autonomous landscape of Butoh has become multiplied, evolving from its original founders’ opposition to fixed techniques into a discipline that offers multiple sets of extreme kinetic styles, all open to liberal adaptation. Oguri's aesthetics and choreography informed by BWL are rooted in this abundant and intercultural landscape, adhering neither to Hijikata's protest against social prohibition nor to his anti-West and anti-industrialization bias.

Body Weather Laboratory, the format of exploration devised by Tanaka and currently taught by Oguri and Steinberg in L.A., consists of a three-part training program that starts with “rigorous mind/body, muscle/bone training,” moving to “specific stretching and relaxing exercises concerned with breathing and alignment,” and then to “explorations designed to develop the scope of expression through the body.” In its intense interest in discovering and cultivating the maximum potential of the human body in stillness and movement, BWL upholds Butoh's affirmation of “the dance which lies within the body.” BWL further adds to this affirmation of corporeal existence by highlighting its interactions with the external surrounding.

For me, BWL's focus on the circumstantial juxtaposition between the “soft” body and the “hard” environment recalls a terrifying image in Fumio Kamei's film Ikite-iteyokata (The Shadow on the Stone): “the preserved silhouette of a man burned into a rock by the atomic flash” in Hiroshima. Abstracted from its catastrophic history, a human imprint on a rock provides a specific image for Tanaka's elusive coinage “body weather.” Tanaka has never fully articulated the conceptual foundation for Body Weather Laboratory, but, in my conception, it involves at least three thematic propositions: (1) The body is troped as a microcosm with different climate zones (weather)—the body as a thermokinetic landscape that generates both heat (thermo-) and motion (kinetics). (2) The body (as a microcosm) is placed within the weather (the macrocosm), which is in turn a metaphor for the uncontrollable environment. (3) The body is merged with and becomes (part of) the weather; the body (perceived as a mere object with temperature) is assimilated into the weather's dynamics. This last proposition stands in closest proximity to the post-Hiroshima image of the human profile on the rock, which demonstrates the power of an immeasurable (nuclear) force that mineralized a human body at a split second, the second that equalized all weather zones.

Combining the first two propositions brings us to a common theatrical situation where a performer—as a microcosmic body weather—enacts a work at an open rather than an enclosed site. The weather at this open site is the performative condition confronting the performing body; the performance is literally an experiment in the body weather laboratory. This scenario offers us an angle from which to read Oguri and Renzoku's dances, for the company has often performed outdoors, raising the stake of their BWL work. The choice of an open site subjects the dancing bodies to the contingencies of an uncertain environment/weather, while it simultaneously renders that open environment a live set for their performance. The performing bodies are read as specific thermokinetic landscapes juxtaposed with a larger landscape; there is a free circulation of multicentric weather zones in between these bodies and amid the weathered environment that sustains and frames them.

This montage of moving flesh and an extensive, unframed site contributes to an innovative use of space in the theatrical matrix. Oguri and Renzoku performed A Flame in the Distance
(1997), for example, in the California Plaza, the outdoor common in a shopping mall built in the Downtown Bunker Hill area of L.A. Like a basin carved into mountains of architecture or a large clearing


In an urban jungle, California Plaza is surrounded by sleek skyscrapers and is adjacent to the Museum of Contemporary Art (designed by the Japanese architect Arata Isozaki). In this collaborative piece, Oguri and Cadman, the music director, fully utilize the site by composing a performance trajectory that, through action rather than spoken instruction, leads the audience from one section to another. The performer—in this case both Renzoku and the Illustrious Theater Orchestra—becomes the moving “body weather” that animates the apparently inert built environment (fig. 44). Since the performance starts at dusk, a dramatic body weather experiment consists of the change from the gradually fading natural light to the even brilliance of electric lights, together with a drop in the surrounding temperature.

My third proposition related to BWL—that the body is absorbed into the weather—appears as a preternatural performative trait in Oguri's choreography. Through what I might call an aesthetics of animistic transmutation, Oguri and the dancers directed by him often identify with the creatures they embody, the props they use, the themes they represent, and the environment they inhabit to such an extent that they become perceptually fused with these others.

Such an aesthetic process of animistic transmutation is of course not a new invention by BWL. Itechoes an ancient Japanese theater technique practiced for centuries by Noh actors, who purport to be possessed by the spirit of the masks that barely cover their whole faces. Paying homage to Shintoism, Noh actors cohabit the stage with their masks, costumes, and symbolic props (such as the fan) as equals. Further, they are ready to be animated, hence transmuted, by these nonhuman others. The premodern and indigenous belief in animism has retained its hold on Ankoku Butoh, even though Hijikata and Ohno rejected the dramaturgical symbolism of Noh. It seems a tragic irony that, before Ankoku Butoh or BWL, such a spiritual belief was mocked by history, when the human victim of Hiroshima suffered a transmutation that melded his body with the rock's calcareous substance. The man and the rock became equals in that fusion.
I have witnessed the process of animistic transmutation performatively achieved by Oguri and Renzoku—from whatever inspiration their art is derived. Surrendering their humanness to the impetus of performance, Oguri and his dancers become a tree, a pair of high heels, a fixture on the wall, the wind, or a monkey-duck in a dune. The playful umbrellas in Beyond Eyeball, for instance, do not serve the dancers as utilitarian instruments; on the contrary, these umbrellas have temporarily usurped the dancers' bodies, with their performing fingers and limbs functioning as the umbrellas' antennas or extremities. Such a homi-xenological fusion is, to me, also a core experience in the stream of consciousness.

All three dancers in the stream of consciousness employ the strategy of effacement to suspend their own subjectivities. Oguri covers his face with a dipper, as does Burris with the umbrella. Having drenched himself with water, Chen eventually works his head and one arm inside the empty bucket. In addition to this deliberate strategy of disguise, the dancers'attitudes suggest their union with the objects they manipulate (fig. 45). They become so commingled with these objects that they keep their former postures even when these props are dropped. Are the dancers suffering from the phantom limb syndrome, missing the lost props as their severed body parts? Or are these human figures actually the dipper's, the umbrella's, and the bucket's phantom limbs? Who are the selves and who are the others in this scene? Who is the dreamer whose streams of consciousness have made this perceptual transposition between (human) subjects and (nonhuman) objects possible? Maybe the dreamer is the site La Boca, with its walls of peeling paint, its windows opening to the thoroughfares of South Central, and its adjacent courtyard within a Mission. Maybe the spectators, myself included, are the dreamers, led on by the dancers' trips to the unknown and hypnotized by their ruminative tempos. Because time seems infinitely protracted by the dancers' slow gait, even the grating of speeding wheels on the smoggy asphalt outside sounds surreal.

A similar kind of perceptual transposition creates some spectacular scenes in A Flame in the Distance. The opening action centers around a small flat and low fountain base in a side pocket of the California Plaza. The audience sits on the concrete steps opposite the round fountain base, which contains numerous waterspouts, now dry, framed by metal rings. In low squatting positions, four dancers (Lakshimi Aysola, Boaz Barkan, Jamie Burris, and Dona Leonard), dressed in white and each holding in her/his mouth a string attached to a white balloon, move from different corners. Oguri whirls on the fountain base in a gyrating solo, while other dancers, accompanied by a solo clarinet, eventually join him from their halting...
routes. Their white balloons, promptly released, disperse into the graying sky; in the distance, they look like fireflies carrying their contained flames on an autumn journey. Suddenly there is the sound of an explosion, then another, and another, building a rhythmic chant. It is the sound of motors pumping out water from the metal rings. The streams rush out with such velocity and diffusion that they look like splendid fireworks, with the dancers at times cowering under and at times exulting over these liquid flames. A transposition of two opposing elements (water and fire = water as fire) is perceptually realized in a sonic, visual, and haptic drama of fluctuating motions and temperatures.

Whereas the transposition of natural elements provides a highlight for the opening sequence, an emotional admixture of contrary moods—melancholy and jubilation, solitude and plenitude—demonstrates a different kind of animistic transmutation in A Flame in the Distance. Nomadic dancers prompt the audience to move to California Plaza's central courtyard, which features a huge square pond connected to a dam. Renzoku dancers, now changed to black, pick up canvas water buckets with their mouths and promenade around the waterfront. They move like grazing cows or donkeys on the bank, while Oguri walks across the pond into darkness. In an adjacent pavilion, the Illustrious Theater Orchestra (with Greg Adamson's cello, Shane W. Cadman's and Ron Shelton's keyboards, Arthur Bowansky's violin, Scott McIntosh's clarinet, and John P. Hoover's bass clarinet) presents a minimalist melody evoking Catholic mass. The dancers with buckets cruise into the pond, gradually lowering their bodies until only their heads and the buckets float above the water. Their apparitions emerge in encrypted contrast to the steel-and-glass urban environment, which encases their kinetic rituals.

The performing site's visual geography comes into vivid play at this juncture. Like the other spectators scattered around the shopping mall, I watch the action from a distance, for we are all blocked by the pond's boundary. Against the grandiose urban landscape and the illuminated water, the floating objects look lonesome, like hapless birds caught in the waves. Yet, from a different perspective, they look like full-blown lilies, at home in their element. Oguri's solitary figure appears, as if out of thin air, on the upper-middle level of the dam, dancing his way down while other dancers are veering upward. The moment they join cues the dam to come alive: a magnificent waterfall cascades from the top of the landscape to immerse the dancers in its grandeur.

Even as I chart the “body weather” of my perceptions, Oguri's art affords my thought philosophical space—Zenlike or not. The animistic transmutation occurs only in the realm of perceptions, for the dancers remain intact after their performance ends, unlike the post-Hiroshima profile on the rock. The climate of my perceptions is manipulated by the ability of these dancers to empty themselves of human will and become continuous with their surroundings, existing as unintrusively as a blade of grass in a meadow or a sand painting in a desert. Without an external force like the atomic flash, these dancers allow their subjectivities imploded like a breath-holding tranquillity, while they endure progressive fossilization with patience and intensity. I am induced into a state of reverie by the very absence of a cry for my attention, which permits my perceptions to lapse sporadically, only to be shocked by the minutest mutation in the unfolding spectacle—“Ah, he has moved from squatting to an asymmetrical crouch, but when
did that happen?" The question of “when” figures centrally in my perceptual lapses, which are fostered by the prolonged sense of time in Oguri's choreography. An effect of syncopation results: the players and the viewers seem never fully harmonized in their speeds/beats of perception. There is then a displacement of narrative certainty in Oguri's thermokinetic theater, not only because he uses a body language eluding semantics, but also because his language, rid of its desire for seamless communication, encourages the eccentricity of those syncopated (mis-stressed) perceptual beats.

An active stance of passivity characterizes Oguri's tendency to let multivalent action unfold without imposing an authorial commentary. Such a noninterventionist stance also affects Oguri's treatment of modern technology, which was a prime target of critique for Ankoku Butoh. In contrast to Hijikata, Oguri professes no resistance to the industrial weather that hovers over us all. Instead, he accepts a fortuitous union between body and technology, as illustrated by a statement from his press kit: “The harsh and stunning dance of Oguri signifies the marriage of the primordial body/self with the modern, industrio-technological world.”

This noncritical attitude toward technology takes a complex turn in In Between the Heartbeat, a collaboration by Oguri (choreography), Hirokazu Kosaka (scenic installation and archery), Yuval Ron (music), and Morleigh Steinberg (lighting).

Clean-shaven and naked except for a flesh-colored fundoshi that covers his privates, Oguri lies prostrate on top of a photocopier raised to the stage level at the central aisle of the auditorium in the Japanese American Theatre in L.A.'s Little Tokyo. The first motion comes from the repetitive, vacillating lights projecting from the copier, which simultaneously beats out amplified rhythms of locomotive percussion. Propelled by this mechanical, thermokinetic stimulus, Oguri slowly arches his back, pulling his midriff up from the glass surface, yet remaining on all fours. His body is bathed in the radiation from the copier, which casts a humongous shadow of his subtle dance on the white screen that stretches across the proscenium stage, while carving out swinging pendulums of light. Oguri suddenly jumps on the machine like a frog. The white screen, now illuminated from behind, becomes a translucent shield, through which we see a sumptuous backdrop made of two hundred colorful electric blankets: a dappled mural and a neatly patched-up carpet of quilts. Next to this lavish visual drama is a humorous allusion to the theme of copy-ing. Boaz Barkan, also naked and clean-shaven, jumps like a frog on top of another xerox machine placed behind the screen. This amusing cloning is soon
topped by another doubling. Roxanne Steinberg and Jamie Burris, with their long brown hair covering their naked chests, emerge from a slit in the middle of the backdrop. Mermaids in midair, they smile broadly with eyes shut, swerving their arms and upper bodies in ceaseless melodious motions amid an undulating electric-blanket ocean (fig. 46).

Although the piece is performed without intermission and the choreographic style remains consistent throughout, In Between the Heartbeat is formally divided into two acts by the change in scenery, which radically shifts its thematic implications. The scenic environment for the first act is defined by the electric-blanket mural and the photocopiers, ten of which are scattered around the stage, together with a big pile of electric blankets folded on the floor. These spectacles disappear in the second act, hidden behind a screen that features a wall-size black-and-white target.

All the major scenic components have autobiographical associations for the designer Kosaka. When he traveled from Japan to L.A. as a child, his first encounter with Western technology was an electric blanket, which kept him warm during the night. The photocopier is a technological vehicle on which his work as the exhibitions coordinator for L.A.'s Japanese American Cultural and Community Center depends. The image of the target in the second act echoes the performance's title, which was inspired by Kosaka's practice of Kyudo, a school of archery that traces its roots to prehistoric Japan. According to Kosaka, “in between the heartbeat” is the moment at which a Kyudo archer must release the arrow so as to shoot straight. An archer needs therefore to heed his/her own heartbeats in addition to noting the external target. This meditative dimension in Kyudo reflects the influence of Zen Buddhism, because such absolute concentration is in essence a killing of the self, metaphorically removing the ego from the process of shooting. “The bow and arrow have their own spirit,” says Kosaka. “The minute a man puts his own character on it, it destroys that spirit.”

Kosaka's comment finds resonance in both Zen Buddhism and prehistoric animism. The former stresses voiding the self, whereas the latter believes that a spirit resides within every object. In a program note, Kosaka reveals his adherence to both spiritual disciplines, offering an impressionistic rendition of the unusual scenic elements: “The warmth of the electric currents cascade over our bodies as we sleep and the ubiquitous spirit rises through the eternal light of the copy machines as anthropomorphic figures.” Kosaka's note compares the electric blanket to a cascading waterfall of warmth and turns the copiers into animistic hosts. The Renzoku dancers are accordingly the “anthropomorphic figures” emanating from the charged copiers, which project “eternal light.” By implication, Kosaka does not necessarily take the electric blanket and the copier as symbols of technology. Instead, these objects are merely different formal phenomena endowed with such fundamental attributes as temperature and light.

In contrast to Kosaka's introspective nonchalance, Oguri's program note carries both an apocalyptic tinge and a redemptive claim: “Today the world is top-heavy with information / Humans are losing instinct and are like domestic animals without masters / Dance is a way to restore the senses to a body in crisis.” An anti-technology ideology that recalls Hijikata's stance underlies this comment. Moreover, the phrase “a body in crisis” brings to mind Hijikata's remark about Butoh: “Through dance we must depict the human posture in crisis, exactly as it is.” Oguri's pointed comment marks a departure from his noninterventionist stance, indicating his editorial gauge in selecting the choreographic patterns. During the actual
performance, this thematic imperative goes through two stages of realization, both in direct interaction with Kosaka's sets.

In the first act, four Renzoku dancers wander in a constructed landscape, which is peculiar but not necessarily oppressive. By analogy, the electric blankets assume the roles of mountains, seas, caves, or mansions, and the copiers of trees, boats, hearths, or rooms. Each dancer occupies an independent space without any hint of territorial struggle. One explores the electric blankets as if seeking shelter; one displays attenuated postures atop a copier; one crawls on the floor like an insectile marionette; one spins like a weathercock. With their heads and bodies now covered in hooded raincoats, the dancers look like pre-gendered creatures in a collective act of diversion and survival. The theme of reproduction, however, is not determinedly pejorative, but may be construed as learning by imitation. The dancers' movements are rife with animal imagery, yet the atmosphere is fluid and suggestive, not doomed. Even the music features sequences of idyllic motifs in between the percussive, mechanical sounds made by the photocopiers—are they moments of play amid the relentless evolutionary march? A few segments evoke ecological threats. The dancers cover their upper faces in hoods to reveal only their mouths, emitting silent screams. Are they eyeless phantoms caught in a polluted limbo or merely arid creatures bored by the rain? The ambiguity of the scenic environment produces a gestalt of indeterminacy that displaces the dancers' kinetic vocabularies to a realm of endless metaphors, none dominant.

But apocalypse does arrive in the second act, with the descent of a vertical “sky” centrally dominated by a target. Music corroborates with the scenery to heighten the tension. The dancers—sans raincoats—look intently at the sky, scrambling to different corners. Like frightened animals, they have sensed danger in the wind, which carries Kosaka's flying arrows. The dancers cower on the ground, trying to become as small as possible. In an impressive choreographic segment, all four dancers assume the same posture of stiffened head and torso, with both arms closely attached to the body and perennially bent legs (fig. 47). In a quickened tempo that conveys alertness and anxiety, the four disperse in different directions, walking and pausing repeatedly. An unmistakable narrative has emerged: the human figures on stage are hunted prey. Perhaps they are hunted by the force of industrialization, which has produced an alienating urban environment ridden with surveillance and crimes. Another scenic device by Kosaka bears out my conjecture: A searchlight placed outside the Japanese American Theatre projects a brilliant cone of light on stage. Steinberg, Burris, and Barkan gradually exit, leaving only Oguri standing at stage center, opposite the towering target. Impelled by the searchlight, Oguri stretches out his arms and drops his head backward, holding this arduous posture, which resembles a Christ-figure in reverse, for an eternity. Here is a spectacular image of martyrdom, of a solitary Expressionist hero pawned by technology's dehumanizing violence—a man posed against the poisonous sun!

Such aheroic posture is rare in Oguri's choreographic repertoire. Most Renzoku performances I've seen end with a collective portrait of celebration, ritualistic awakening, or humorous provocation. The effect of those collective portraits seems antithetical to the semantic certainty of the culminating scene of In Between the Heartbeat, for the image of a man being sacrificed on the
cross of a target and a searchlight clearly signifies. I remember being seduced by the visual splendor of Oguri’s ending ordeal in *In Between the Heartbeat*, but I miss the philosophical space that invites my contemplation by its negative presence.

**Cyborgs in Mutation: osseus labyrint**

The subjects are cyborg, nature is Coyote, and the geography is Elsewhere.

Donna Haraway[84]

October 2, 1999: A crew with heavy-duty cables, electric generators, sound and lighting equipment, and video cameras gathers in Los Angeles River's concretedefilled riverbed for a location shoot. This rather frequent sight in L.A. is the cover for an impending live performance, which doubles as the filming of a documentary by osseus labyrint, the multidisciplinary ensemble founded and led by Hannah Sim and Mark Steger.[85] Sim and Steger had tried without success to obtain a permit for an on-site live performance here underneath the First Street Bridge. They changed their strategy to apply for a film permit and secured official approval within a week. The duo carried out this subterfuge by inviting audience members to witness their performance for free, on the condition that they would appear as unpaid extras in their video documentary.

September 22, 1999 [Backtrack]: An air of L.A. confidentiality begins to generate ten days before a planned live event in the downtown section of Los Angeles River. osseus labyrint announces the coming of *THEM* with a postcard, which displays what appears to be a classical perspectival painting of the First Street Bridge astride its postindustrial site, flanked by railroad tracks on both banks. At the center of the postcard a pale spectral figure walks on all fours; on the postcard's lower edge a series of cryptic lines and dots look like a mixture between a barcode and telegraphic signals. “A Scout from Mars snooping in L.A.!” flashes the image's subtext, an almost compulsive “reader's response” in this sci-fi-fed, tabloid-news-jaded metropolis. “The truth is out there.”[86] And we must go find it! So prods the cryptic postcard from osseus labyrint, which omits most details but lists an information number. At
this number a three-minute recorded message instructs the caller where to meet, what to wear, how to get down to the riverbed, and when to call again for contingencies. The scent of a semilegal clandestine affair lingers.

October 2, 1999 [Fast forward]: In the late afternoon osseus labyrint arrives at the side alley next to the First Street Bridge to find its planned entrance to the riverbed blocked by a mile-long train. The railroad police exacerbate the situation by forbidding anyone to cross the track because of an accident that killed two people the day before. The company has to change the performance site to the opposite bank, while improvising a human map by stationing attendants at strategic spots to guide the audience through the urban labyrinth of downtown L.A.

October 2, 1999 [Five hours later]: The audience arriving in cars is rerouted by guides in orange night-glo jackets, swinging flashlights. More than a hundred cars trail each other, circling around factory lots and downtown shops and then diving through the storm drain that plummets into the riverbed. We spectators are instructed to drive close to the bank, cross the water that slightly hugs the tires, stay away from the central current, and triple-park on the riverbed. We then climb up the concrete bank and cautiously hold onto the barbwire that divides the river from the railroad track as we trek toward the performance site for THEM. There are already people sitting on the sloping bank underneath the concrete bridge, waiting.

All this is the circumstantial drama preceding osseus labyrint's THEM, a project that both marks the group's return to open-site performance and signals its closer relationship with the geography and culture of L.A. Before Sim and Steger moved to L.A. in 1994, they spent a lot of time abroad enacting site-specific projects in various out-of-the-way places, including castles, catacombs, temples, treetops, ships, and psychiatric hospitals. To continue their (ad)ventures in the rule-conscious United States, however, proved to be more difficult than the extreme risks they took with their performances because, in this country, staging a live action in even the remotest public site requires a government permit and exorbitant insurance. As THEM suggests, ingenuity is sometimes needed to circumvent bureaucracy. The artists' contrasting experiences in applying for a live performance permit and a film permit of course reflect the influence of L.A.'s film industry, which seemingly owns the monopoly to all deliberately staged dangerous human actions in the city. That Sim and Steger are able to make their project happen speaks to their sensitivity to the political/economic superstructure of L.A. Their project, in turn, showcases their extraordinary body art in a part of L.A. often seen in sci-fi action films but rarely inhabited by a live audience. Insofar as the unique urban geography of the Los Angeles River functions as an indispensable part of THEM, osseus labyrint has created an art performance that could not happen in the same fashion elsewhere.

In conceptual terms, I regard the performance of THEM as beginning with the dissemination of the postcard that invites audience participation. The information “hotline” urges callers to reconnect at a later date—preferably an hour before the designated event; potential spectators become enmeshed in a psychic theater that attracts their consensual actions with a promise tantalizing in its mystique. Since there is no advertisement for THEM other than the postcard and since the performance is free and its site unusual, callers for information become messengers carrying the clues to a treasure hunt. Word of mouth spreads these lures among potential viewers like self-generated rumors hatching a cult. The condition of exchange—free
spectatorship for volunteering as an extra in a film—heightens the excitement, even in a city where being in a movie is as “impossible” as eating a takeout pizza!

Considering both its circumstantial drama and the impact of its environment, I may best describe THEM as a “habitat performance.” A habitat is a unique locus where certain organisms survive and thrive; a habitat performance is then a new species of performance that lures the audience to a specific (open) site to observe the bio-activities of rare creatures. The highlight of a habitat performance arises from the dynamic interplay between the performer, who assumes the roles of the biota (flora and fauna) in the given habitat, and the habitat itself, the time/space within which the bio-performance occurs. Biology and ecology, in short, are the major themes of a habitat performance. In all likelihood, the audience for a habitat performance resembles avoyeurs-tic theater audience once the action starts. The bio-ecological context of a habitat performance, however, places its audience by default into the positions of

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**48 osseus labyrint, Gordian(not), 1997, performed at Highways, Santa Monica, California. Hannah Sim and Mark Steger's bodies as habitat. Photo © 1998 Richard Downing. Courtesy of osseus labyrint.**

biologists, environmentalists, collectors, hunters, or tourists, who, for varying reasons, arrive to watch the animals or vegetation that dwell in the particular territory.

The intertwining of biology and ecology has been a predominant feature in osseus labyrint's numerous performance sightings in L.A. Before they were able to stage their “biology” within a found “ecology” in a project like THEM, Sim and Steger managed to conflate the two themes in their choreography, creating their habitat through their bodies (fig. 48). There is a direct correlation between their corporeal formalism and the fabrication of their habitat. In a metaphorical sense, one may suggest, every theatrical environment is a simulated habitat and the players in it, caught in the sound and fury of that artificial microcosm, are histrionic creatures worthy of our curiosity and scrutiny. What makes osseus labyrint stand out from this theatrical/metaphorical usage is that the group literally constructs its habitat out of the performing bodies, thereby fusing the bio-ecological topoi of ethology and habitat.

Sim and Steger invent a formal language with little else than their bodies. They start with the visual design of their stage presence. Skin as uniform: the couple's standard costume is their naked and clean-shaven bodies. Their convention of not wearing any clothes in performance emulates the natural state of other animals, while reinforcing the ethological dimension of their choreography.
The two artists not only move but dress like beasts, fish, fowls, insects, or microbes—with nothing but their born coating. If the duo's corporeal morphology establishes their proximity to bipeds, their customized appearance on stage ironically accentuates their distance from other humans. Indeed, Sim's and Steger's own strikingly similar and unusual physiques—tall, bald, pale, and gracefully lanky—add an intimation of uncanniness to their matter-of-fact display of hairless nudity. Glanced from a distance, their performance personas look more like elongated, emaciated, and genderless specters of extraterrestrial beings than two specimens of *Homo sapiens* in motion. To the extent that their bare stature and kinetic stylization succeed in displacing our sense of reality to an altered realm, Sim's and Steger's bodies become osseus labyrint's transportable habitat.

While osseus labyrint's performances are rife with allusions to the natural world, the company's aesthetics belongs more precisely to the liminal zone where the natural, the artifactual, and the paranormal converge. Such an intermixture may be partially ascribed to the prevalent postmodernist tendencies of aesthetic hybridity and fragmentation. It is also a studied result of Sim and Steger's joint quest, specified by their mission statement as "a laboratory of random mutations." Central to osseus labyrint's art, then, is the continuous experimentation with ideas and acts of mutation.

To start with, Sim and Steger routinely print their company name in lowercase bold type as osseus labyrint. This typographical design shows a mild mutation, for it diverts from the customary practice of capitalizing a proper noun. Etymologically, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, "osseus" is a Latin adjective for "bony"; it has evolved into the English adjective "osseous," meaning "resembling bones; hard or firm as bone," and it can be used to qualify a geological deposit as "containing many fossil bones." Bones have a major significance in understanding the history of life because they virtually document the evolutionary process by leaving fossil records. In addition to this biological implication, "osseous" seems a visually precise term for capturing my immediate perception of Sim's and Steger's bony physiques. By adopting the word's archaic Latin form, the artists give priority to the sense of unfamiliarity in tandem with the effect of mutation.

"Labyrint," is related to the noun "labyrinth," indicating a complex structure like a maze or an intricate system. In anatomy and zoology, "labyrinth" denotes "the inner ear," which is, according to *Gray's Anatomy*, "the essential part of the organ of hearing, receiving the ultimate distribution of the auditory nerve." Sim and Steger found their company name in this nineteenth-century medical textbook, which notes that the labyrinth consists of two parts: the "osseous labyrinth, a series of cavities channeled out of the substance of the petrous bone, and the membraneous labyrinth, the latter being contained

As part of the organ of hearing, the inner ear is crucial to maintaining balance in locomotion. Sim and Steger initially named their company "osseus labyrint," adopting and modifying an anatomical picture of the inner ear as the company logo. Steger indicates that "labyrinth" also has evolutionary implications, citing the well-known paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould's remark that "the history of life is a labyrinth, not a ladder of progress." Sim and Steger

The current usage of "osseus labyrint" came about when, during their 1990 tour to Czechoslovakia, the local press happened to drop the "h" from "labyrinth." Sim and Steger
decided to accommodate this accidental slippage—a move that exemplifies the artists' affinity for mutation, which is in essence a radical alteration through chance or design.

This affinity for mutation also fosters Sim and Steger's kinetic style. I like to describe their movement style as “alien body art” for two reasons: because Sim and Steger have half-seriously identified themselves as “aliens” and because I've never seen anything quite like it—a hybrid between dance, acrobatics, body art, and extreme sports. Predictably, the artists themselves resent fixing their art in a definite category. They object especially to my labeling of their work as “dance” and complain that they have frequently suffered from the press's miscalification of their work as “Butoh.” I keep the term “dance,” however, as a viable reference to their work in the light of the many nontraditional movements developed in the dance field since the 1960s.

To the untrained eye, certain traits in osseus labyrint's performance, such as nudity, strenuous movements, or hanging upside down, do resemble Butoh. These superficial resemblances dissolve under scrutiny. One formalistic difference lies in osseus labyrint's neoclassical approach to balance. Whereas most Butoh styles privilege asymmetrical movements, osseus labyrint features an overall emphasis on symmetry, without excluding some asymmetrical moments. As I surmise, this difference results from the different bases of kinetic mimesis. The philosophy of animism in Butoh allows the dancers to express the spirits of both animate and inanimate beings (such as animals, deities, plants, minerals, and natural elements). I find that osseus labyrint has the different objective of creating forms for animate and animated beings (such as animals and machines), which commonly depend on symmetry for locomotion and spatial orientation. Thus, whatever kinetic patterns Sim and Steger have learned from Butoh, they have sifted them through a process of mutation to issue a product stylistically alien to Butoh.

Infact, Steger and Sim have had only limited encounters with Butoh. Both artists believe their performance style has more to do with other factors from their personal backgrounds than with Butoh—although Butoh was considered postmodern chic when they first started osseus labyrint in the Bay Area.

Steger's earliest exposure to performance was through his participation in the experimental theater troupe Elbows Akimbo in San Francisco in the late 1980s. But he regards his visual work in animation as the most significant influence on his art. As an animator, he has often practiced making faces and contorting his body in front of a mirror in order to create cartoon characters. He has also learned from animation how to perceive things in a narrow time span and how to break down movements into a sequence of split-second frames. Sim describes herself as a loner and a nomad who has an intense interest in the natural world, in the paradigms of microcosm and macrocosm, in traveling, and in scientific investigations. A born athlete, Sim grew up practicing all kinds of sports, art, music, and dance, with a lot of family support. From these activities, she searched for those instances that corresponded to the forms of expression within her body—“I was already formed inside before I learned anything,” she says. Yet she never expected to share her body expressions with anyone else until she joined a Butoh workshop in San Francisco. At the first meeting she discovered what these dancers were doing was more similar to what she was doing behind closed doors than most other things she had come across. Her discovery appeared to be shared: the company asked her to join their tour from that very first meeting. Thus, when Steger and Sim began collaborating in 1989, each had had some performance experiences related to experimental theater and dance.
Their life and work partnership itself, however, emerged as the central catalyst for subsequent chain reactions, yielding the mutated osseus labyrinth style as their distinct joint signature.\cite{fn89}

In biology, mutation is considered a mechanism of evolution. Mutation and genetic recombination produce variability among individuals and this variability is then subject to natural selection: a certain variant may increase the organism's adaptability and potential for survival and reproduction or it may be de-selected as unfit.\cite{fn90} In genetics, mutation denotes an inheritable change in genetic information in an organism's chromosomes. Mutation may occur spontaneously, through errors in DNA replication, or result from exposure to radiation or physical or chemical agents. Mutation may produce harmful effects and eventually be eliminated; or it may enhance an offspring's adaptability; or it may be inherited without any apparent benefit to the species' survival.

Although mutation is implicated in the evolutionary process, we may distinguish the two phenomena by their temporal span and thematic accent. Evolution traces the extended line of development based on natural selection and on all living beings' instinctive drive for survival. Mutation is often perceived as abrupt, aberrant, and intractable, for it may happen accidentally or without easily discernible reasons. While evolution encompasses both the conservation and change of certain genetic traits, mutation has a singular stress on change. Since osseus labyrinth invests in the concept of mutation, the company's work frequently takes the theme of evolution as an omnipresent backdrop, the larger environment against which mutations are marked.

In \textit{Woof} (1998) Sim and Steger interpret mutation as an evolution hastened by the desires to learn, to play, and to mate.\cite{fn91} The action begins with Sim slowly descending onto the stage by tilting her head backward and resting her nape on a strap with a loop hanging from the ceiling. From the wing Steger crawls in, mainly by contracting his shoulder and waist muscles to propel himself forward. Sim lies prostrate on the floor, struggling to climb up, beating her arms against the ground. She encounters Steger, a random meeting that occasions series of changes to both their bodies, intimating mutations across the species line. They make first contact by smelling each other out, gradually raising their upper torsos. They establish further communication by imitating each other's body languages. Their flirtation ends with a simple ritual of layering their bodies on top of one another. After their union, they seem to climb "up" the evolutionary ladder to walk on all fours, Bobbing their heads around in an osseus labyrinth routine that Sim and Steger call "pachyderming" (walking like a large, thick-skinned, hoofed mammal such as an elephant, with the neck waving like an elephant's trunk). The piece culminates in a humorous tour-de-force when Sim, in her pachyderming posture, lays an egg in plain sight! The evolutionary "woof" has gone awry, mating a vulture-ermine with a slug-lizard and letting an amphibian hippopotamus lay a single bouncy egg.

Evolution as motivated mutation coordinates the action of \textit{Woof}, which stars two phenomenally adaptable creatures rooting for pleasure, procreation, and survival. Yet, more often than not, mutation is an involuntary act, producing consequences beyond the control of the mutated subjects and their others. The crisis of mutation becomes a pre-text for \textit{THEM}, evoking a preceding text—a 1954 sci-fi movie \textit{Them!}—and serving as a pretext for osseus labyrinth's largely plotless action. The Gordon Douglas movie takes its title from a scene in which a horrified little girl barely identifies the killers of her family by blurting out, "\textit{Them! Them!}"\cite{fn92} The homicidal "them" is a horde of nuclear-mutated, carnivorous giant ants, escaping human prosecution from New Mexico to California, while preying on people,
destroying property, and stealing sugar. The movie's final countdown spectacle takes place in
the Los Angeles River's drainage system, where an army directed by entomologists overtakes
the mutant ants in their new nest.

The preexisting narrative framework from a cult Hollywood movie adds an inflection to the
circumstantial drama of THEM. By analogy, we who come to wait and watch become either the
worker ants attending the queen's mating dance, or the human defenders who seek to sabotage
the habitat of them: the antenna-sprouting aliens. In either scenario, we have entered their

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an environment punctuated by moist smells, moving trains, electric towers, the spectacular
arch of the First Street Bridge, and its graffiti-marked, wall-like foundation that serves as the
skein for THEM. By allowing ourselves to be enclosed within this alien habitat, we
voluntarily participate in a performance that enlists us as well as the urban site as extras, who
are, by definition, characters in a make-believe illusion. We walk into our positions as we,
observing the performers as them, while the half-dry riverbed of the Los Angeles River plays
out its role as their habitat. Both the preshow audience activities and the surrounding
geography are, then, integral to this event. THEM as a habitat performance, offers a gestalt
experience, for it casts even the smoggy L.A. night sky as the radiation-polluted horizon in a
sci-fi future.

To some extent, the movie reference also exists as a pretext, considering that it only reinforces
osseus labryint's recurrent motifs of alienation, mutation, and migration without supplying
THEM with a search-(the monsters) and-destroy-(them) plotline. In fact, there is no program
note citing the scifi movie as a pre-text, an inter-text, or a post-text. Knowing about Them! is
by no means a prerequisite for enjoying THEM, although awareness of the movie may add
some provocative nuances to the event. THEM unfolds in and of itself more like a
hyperdance, a happening, and an extreme spectacle than a narrative drama. A tightly
constructed visual opera, the piece consists of three distinct acts. Each act happens in an
isolated microlocation within the habitat and progresses through a sequence of effervescent
movements.

The first act might be called an acrobatics of flight, echoing the giant ants' escape through the
air in Them! The action begins with an electronic auralscape of natural and mechanical sounds
(the wind, the water flowing, a train) prerecorded from the river environment and recomposed
and performed by Daniel Day and Ann Perich. Sim and Steger enter in their standard
costumes: hairless and bare despite the chilly river wind. The duo swiftly strap themselves on
foot harnesses, pulling their bodies up on two ropes that hang from the bridge (fig. 49).
Suspended about thirty feet off the ground, without a safety net, Sim and Steger loosen their
harnesses to hang upside down by their ankles. They keep their chins tucked and their arms
upside down to pause in midair, like bats in hibernation. Their stillness and apparent ease
induce the perception that they operate on reversed gravity. The only telltale sign about their
“unnatural” postures appears as the subtle differentiation of colors: their upper torsos look
slightly redder (bloodier) than their lower limbs.

The twinlike body artists, illuminated by a searchlight, cast mammoth shadows on the skein.
The uncanny similarities of their physiques and bodily surfaces elude sexual differentiation,
even individual distinction. Such similarities are fortified by their symmetrical choreography,
which renders their shadows virtually identical and synchronized in motion. At times they modify
their abdomens in spasmodic breathings so that the shapes of their spines and rib cages become plainly visible, thereby giving tangible form to what Artaud once feverishly termed a “body without organs.” Then, in an action as phenomenal as their initial upside-down leaps in space, Sim and Steger pull their bodies upward by walking their hands up their legs. They hold their torsos tightly, becoming balls of a pendulum, vacillating, drifting in evanescent arcs. While their bodies dangle as flesh matter in endless minute contortions, their shadows emerge independently like a pair of phantom amoebas, contracting or relaxing under the microscope's light.
The second act proceeds as an alien tango with the ground, evoking images of earthbound insects. The duo, with their backs toward us, descend into a pool of red light. Keeping their faces averted and legs bent, their backs are canvases for transient muscular forms. They extend their spines and lie prostrate, inching forward, allowing their flesh to rub on the hard surface. Crawling in a horizontal motion, they twist and thrust their arms backward, circling their fingers and turning their hollowed fists around inquisitively like diligent antennas. They raise their whole bodies upward by resting on cheeks and necks; their legs branch out, testing the air (fig. 50). Who are these creatures? I can't help wondering. Sim and Steger are able to transform their anatomies to such a degree that their movements often appear directionless—an optical illusion aided by their naked, hairless, fat-free bodies. From my distant vantage point, I can scarcely tell whether they are bending forward or backward to walk on all fours. Are they pachyderming or belly-dancing like a pair of acrobatic tortoises?

While the duo adopt symmetry to produce doubling between them, their kinetic art follows a linear structure to create a flow of metamorphosis: their torsos and limbs mutate in progressive variations without much cyclical repetition. This choreographic linearity formally represents the successive course of evolution; it also emulates the seriality of animation frames. The two artists move through fluid configurations unhindered as if they were projections in a program on “Liquid TV.” Their somatic gestures are both rhythmic and jerky, attenuated and proficient, volatile and rigorous, presenting angles so exaggerated and shapes so difficult and outlandish that they seldom look human. Like hybrids between bugs and engines, reptiles and robots, Sim and Steger evolve from one species to another, or rather, they morph from one animation trope to another. Then, they end the state of constant motions to become ossified specimens. Are they aliens poisoned by human pollution?

The music stops. Two men in plain clothes approach the pair. Jointly they move Steger from the dry concrete to the shallow water about fifteen feet away. They return to move Sim to the water. Some people sigh in disbelief. One guy behind me mumbles, “They are crazy!” But most of us spectators run quickly to the waterfront. Pushed by the two men, the frozen bodies start rolling slowly on their own toward deeper water. Before I can register what is happening, the performers drop into the central current and their twin figures are instantly carried away by the rapids. Against the moonlight, we see only two heads plunging into darkness, oceanward. THEM disappears with this breathtaking exit.

Precisely because of their daredevil courage, prowess, and physiological aptitude, Sim and Steger appear to embody postmodern sci-fi visions of the cyborg, a cybernetic organism compounded of the animal and the machine. Celebrated by Donna Haraway as “a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction,” a cyborg is—in my lexicon—a homi-xenological invention that symbolizes the human's cohabitation with and assimilation of the intelligent machines in our thoroughly technologized existence. According to Haraway's elaboration in “A Cyborg Manifesto,” cyborgs are post-Second World War hybrids with two contemporary guises: first, cyborgs are “ourselves and other organic creatures in our unchosen ‘high-technological’ guise as information systems, texts, and ergonomically controlled labouring, desiring, and reproducing systems”; second, cyborgs are “machines in their guise, also, as com-unications systems, texts, and self-acting, ergonomically designed apparatus.”[94] I suggest that Sim and Steger's performance personas recall a third type
of cyborgs that already exists in advanced medical field with prosthesis design: biological organisms that incorporate cybernetic or mechanical implants to facilitate physical functions. I don't mean to imply that Sim and Steger have undergone medical procedures to alter or supplement their anatomies, as the French artist Orlan and the Australian Stelarc have done. Rather, I cite the cyborg as an analogy for osseus labyrinth because during performance Sim and Steger resemble organic machines in appearance and carriage. The duo look alien because their spectacle contains a legion of kinetic stylizations, alternating movements among biomorphic, ethological, and robotic patterns.

The context of cyborfication offers another rationale for the near-mirror images of Sim and Steger's clean-shaven, nude, and smooth surfaces. As Haraway observes felicitously, “The cyborg is a creature in a post-gender world; it has no truck with bisexuality, pre-oedipal symbiosis, unalienated labour, or other seductions to organic wholeness through a final appropriation of all the powers of the parts into a higher unity.” Given their sexual difference, Sim and Steger have downplayed their anatomical divergence in performance. Their stress on back movements, for instance, is an overt strategy in masking their sexuality. The equivalent difficulty in the two's choreographed movements also turns their genital dissimilarity into a nonissue, while heightening their machine-like efficiency and exactitude. Seemingly beyond gender and beyond gravity, the androgynous couple out-trump the high-tech cyborgs with their own low-tech performance magnetism, a mega-science humanly powered by little more than their technology of the body. (Unless I am tricked by my suspicion that Sim and Steger cannot really be, as they profess, aliens.)

The technology of the body is the central appeal of osseus labyrinth's art. Understandably most of their performances are wordless dramas of high athleticism. But even this tendency is subject to mutation. In a 1999 adaptation of Macbeth, osseus labyrinth throws Shakespeare's tragedy of premonition, usurpation, and damnation off in a spin. Interestingly, the title of this piece has inadvertently endured successive mutations. Sim and Steger named their project The Tragedy of Macbeth, which appeared as the title in its performance at Highways. But, from a prior miscommunication, the work was advertised on Highways' performance calendar as Something Wicked This Way Comes. Most recently, in promotional literature prepared for an exhibition of Sim's installation/performance Unsex Me Here (2000), the project was identified as Mac Beth. Considering the central role mutation has played in osseus labyrinth's corpus, I have decided to take Mac Beth, my favorite title among the three, as a shorthand for identifying this project.

The text of Mac Beth includes many of Shakespeare's words, albeit freely shorn and reassembled. The project employs six actors, one runner billed as “Muscle,” and two on-stage (and clothed) musicians. According to the artists, the performance I saw at Highways was a work-in-progress that realized about thirty percent of what they wished to accomplish. Indeed, I observed some shortcomings in Mac Beth, especially in the areas of vocal delivery, characterization, and the semiotic precision in the pairing of verbal and physical languages. But, I believe, the work's treatment of theatricality and its peculiar molting of the Shakespearean beast more than compensate for those shortcomings.

Like THEM, Mac Beth presents a gestalt experience, accomplished by osseus labyrinth's comprehensive design for the event. This design typically encompasses the program brochure, the production concept, and the fabrication of an altered state of existence. Moreover, it is
through the company's kinetic dramaturgy that the mutant theatricality of this multisensory experience is fleshed out.

The program for *Mac Beth* is a slender booklet tied with a cotton rope. The cover features *The Tragedy of Macbeth* in chiseled letters, illustrated by the image of a dagger sliding through two tumbling figures conjoined at their thighs. A symmetrically folded insert in the brochure opens to a distorted anatomical picture of a skull, stretched to link to a trumpet-shape channel/tunnel. The caption reads: “The Right Membranous Labyrinth with Cerebral Hemispheres exposed.” The picture is divided in the middle, opening to reveal a circular map of a brain. The brain map doubles as the diagram of a feudal castle with six compartments, marked respectively “Crown; Letter; Dagger; Vessel; Candle; Wood.” Its caption reads: “The Base of the Cranial Cavity as seen from above,” followed by six quotations from Shakespeare. Each quotation in turn refers back to an emblematic object outlined in the brain-castle.

Like the Witches' riddlelike oracles, these quotations allude to six paradigmatic scenes in the source play, further mapping the adapted course of *Mac Beth*: (1) “fair is foul, and foul is fair”—the prophecy from the three Witches, who promise the future crown for Macbeth; (2) “come, you spirits that tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here, and fill me from the crown to the toe top-full of direst cruelty”—the ambition of Lady Macbeth ignited by the letter she receives from Macbeth; (3) “light thickens, and the crow makes wing to th' rooky wood, good things of day begin to droop and drowse, whilst night's black agents to their preys do rouse”—the assassination of Duncan by Macbeth and the dagger with which he commits regicide; (4) “blood will have blood”—the appearance of Banquo's ghost to haunt Macbeth, who breaks his wine vessel at the banquet; (5) “and all our yesterdays have lighted fools the way to dusty death”—Lady Macbeth's candle-lit sorrow before her suicide; (6) “peace. The charm's wound up”—Macbeth's stabbing by MacDuff, who

is not of woman born, when the Birnam wood comes to Dunsinane. These are the six crucial stages in Macbeth's career as a usurper. The implication is clear: we spectators are guests to the brain of a conspirator. The opening of the folded brochure resembles the opening of the various gates leading to the inner chamber of Macbeth's ambition, which assumes the shape of his scheming skull. In retrospect, this excellent conceit becomes even richer within the context of osseus labyrinth's production concept.

Sim and Steger sum up their concept for *Mac Beth* in one phrase: “an archeological ghost story.” The concise phrase captures the gist of osseus labyrinth's reinterpretation of *Macbeth*, which lies in interpolating a narrative perspective through the figure of an Archeologist. This framing character (played by Marianne Magne) functions much like a surrogate for the spectator and a catalyst for the performer. Her periodic entrances into the scene thread together the six disparate sections noted in the program. Her action, moreover, is defined by her interactions with the six emblematic objects in Macbeth's brain-castle, offering crystallized titles to the episodes dramatized in *Mac Beth*. The Archeologist, for example, finds a candle and takes a snapshot of her find, thereby triggering the episode in which Lady Macbeth (played by Sim), lit by that very candle, washes her hands repeatedly in a ritualistic swan song of madness before death. The action of *Mac Beth* is therefore not exactly propelled by the plan of a usurper, but rather by the adventure of an explorer. The explorer's meddling with the past accidentally awakens the ghosts condemned to rehearse once again their erstwhile passionate moments. In view of this concept, our opening of the folded program takes on another significance: like the Archeologist, we are excavating an ancient site, terrain by terrain, in order to consort with lingering shadows in the cave.
And in the cave we find three bald and naked figures sitting still in foot harnesses hoisted up in midair. On a platform further back stands a similar naked figure, tilting his head toward a big horn hung together with a speaker. Two musicians with noise instruments and synthesizers are installed in a corner to the east. Blackout.

Some strange clunking sounds enter the space, followed by the click of a switch for a tiny spotlight. The light comes from a headlamp worn by a figure fully wrapped in bulky attire, consisting of a miner's helmet, a pair of goggles, a mouth-muffle, rubber gloves, a jumpsuit with assorted tubes plus mountaineering gears, and hard-shelled boots. Moving clumsily about and peering through a magnifying glass, the Archeologist creates a first impression of an astronaut-cum-bounty hunter, sporting her thrifty-store fashion from the future. By her infection-proof costume and by the way her boots clunk and suck on the floor, I sense that we have been transported to another planet or to a remote space/time zone where a different gravity is at work.

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Through her eyes I view the still figures on stage as fossilized remains hidden among rocks and ruins, which emerge as an osseous labyrinth. The Archeologist inspects the horn and touches it, a tentative gesture that animates the dormant phantoms.

Lights come up on the three Witches (played by Sim, Carol Cetrone, and David Hardegree), who gradually unfurl from harnesses to dangle upside down by ankle straps. Their belly muscles contract in full spasms, while musicians speak their greetings amid a prerecorded chorus loop that sounds like ethereal omens. “Fair is foul, and foul is fair, / Hover through the fog and filthy air.” Lights cross-fade to the platform with MacDunquo (played by Peter Schroff)—a hybrid character fusing together Shakespeare's Duncan, Banquo, and MacDuff—listening to battle sounds from the speaker and holding onto the horn, a blown-up “Eartrumpet” that conveys tidings concerning his kingship. But his Crown, as the Witches foretell, is about to be ripped from his forehead to land on his victorious subject of the moment, Macbeth.

Released from their harnesses, the Witches slug-crawl toward the center to meet Macbeth (played by Steger), who enters from the east, unsteady and wavering like, in Ron Athey's keen description, a “graceful gimp, each foot turned out at a disfiguring 135-degree angle.” In a snappy cartoon voice, Macbeth announces his confusion:

    What are these,  
    So withered and so wild in their attire  
    That look not like th'inhabitants of th'earth …  
    You should be women,  
    And yet your beards forbid me to interpret  
    That you are so.

Hailed as he “that shalt be King hereafter,” Macbeth is now surrounded by the “weird sisters,” who have transformed from sluggish snakes into pachyderms. The manner of Steger's delivery heightens the humor of his questioning, for the pack of pachyderming Witches, in their sleek nakedness, surely have neither haggard “attire” nor “beards.”

This opening segment encapsulates all the dramaturgical strategies of Mac Beth. Two levels of reality are staggered across its phantasmic terrain: the reality of the Archeologist, who exists in an indefinite future, and that of the labyrinthine ghosts, who haunt a prehistoric
limbo. The juxtaposition of these two “realities” complicates the sense of time and space constructed by Mac Beth. The Archeologist's paced survey of the relics creates an event-structured frame for the spectators, who witness her action slowly progressing forward inside a ruinous space much as a theater audience does for a play. The Archeologist's (linear) quest periodically launches Mac Beth into six exhibition cycles,

like computerized dioramas in a natural science museum. By the Archeologist's touch, a diegetic space-time suddenly emerges within the diorama, awakening the spectral figures to reenact the episodes that have kept their afterlives in thrall. The action of Mac Beth rises from the alternation between these two levels of existence—the “documentary present” of the Archeologist and the “dramatic past” of the shadows in the cave.

The theatrical matrix engaged by osseus labyrinth revolves around the interactions between the versatile performers and their conceptually and visually provocative action. In Mac Beth this action unfolds as an intense poetry in space and a sonic mishmash comprising the characters' dialogues delivered live by actors or musicians or mediated by broadcast, in addition to music and sound effects looped and performed live. Some presentational dimensions are more successful than others. Tweaked by the patented osseus labyrinth choreography, Mac Beth's 'poetry in space retains my visual interest throughout—this despite and because of the actors' different levels of kinetic expertise. But I find the sonic dimension less resolved. As Macbeth, Steger delivers most of his lines live, in an eccentric cartoon style that at times undercuts the tragic tension. Most of Sim's speech as Lady Macbeth is recorded, flowing in like faded memories. I hear pathos in her soft mediated voice, but the audacity of a woman who vows to be “unsexed” escapes me. At the same time, I have to wonder if my hunger for dramatic flair isn't a reaction from a habitual Shakespearean spectator, who feels both charmed and ill at ease confronting these phenomena of incomprehensible mutation. Am I not searching for an already fictionalized Scotland in an irretrievably mutated Mars?

Two choreographic segments in the “Letter” episode, however, stand out as exemplary scenes where visceral poetry, twisted anatomy, and semiotic rigor do join.

Holding a dusty parchment by pincers, the Archeologist begins reading a letter from Macbeth to his partner in conspiracy, Lady Macbeth, who is now resolved to be queen. Steger reasons out Macbeth's conflict and hesitation by walking a circle in an even pace, while Sim dramatizes Lady Macbeth's simmering anger and deliberation by a complex dance in the middle of the circle. She twists her arms to lock in her head and chest, gradually lowering her stature by spreading her legs, while rocking her body softly back and forth. When Macbeth reaches the pinnacle of his fear of “vaulting ambition,” this osseous Lady Macbeth also sinks to the ultimate reach of her splits, parting the legs laterally to 180 degrees on the ground (fig. 51). Such is the extremity of her resolve!

The persuasion of her gifted body continues. Lady Macbeth kneels in a fetal position; her voiceover whispers seductively, “When you durst do it, then you were a man; / And to be more than what you were, you would / Be so
much more than the man.” Macbeth holds Lady from behind, rocking gently. He slowly stretches his back and lies flat facing up, carrying her body on top of his. Synchronized, they raise their knees and torsos upward, then bend their entangled flesh forward. Like an envelope kissing a letter, Macbeth scoops up his Lady and walks toward their most wicked progeny: “Is this a dagger which I see before me?” I have rarely seen Eros and Thanatos so lightly twinned (fig. 52).

The dialogues between Sim’s and Steger’s body languages leave some of the most indelible impressions behind the ruins of Mac Beth. I may cite their hypnotic doubling in the piece as graphic evidence why Mac Beth is the most pertinent title for this performance. Its story morphs from an Archeologist’s lucky dig, through a baroque warfare among unforgettable ghosts, to an intemperate affair between Mac and Beth. Marianne Magne, as the Archeologist, humorously captures this realization in her program note, written as a Memo by her character:

Findings on site 66, Cawdor, Scotland. Palimpsest #3, deciphered as follows: “I've been bald once” He said. “I've been bald twice” She said. “I've been bald

many times” He said. “I've been bald forever” She said. “Bollocks!” He said. Work hypothesis: The ensuing bloody mess possibly originated from a domestic fight.

Mutation is the absurd made flesh.

**Exit Alley**

If redressive performance resembles polemic essay or revisionary novel, then art performance is akin to poetry. Like poetry, art performance grapples with the essence of its expressive means. As the ontological language of poetry is the author's word, so the foundational lexicon of art performance is the artist's body. But art performance parallels poetry not so much in its purity of means as in its flirtation with ambiguity. This fondness for ambiguity—even in its most brutal manifestations—renders the production of an art performance a doubly poetic act. The artists find their performance receding toward the unknown as much as the critic/spectators do in their struggle to generate a pros-thetic performance that substitutes for the lost origin. In this sense, Gallery Chapter 7 is a virtual ecology born out of the ashes of some poetic beasts long gone. The touch of poetry contaminates art performance and its subsequent (prosthetic) generations. A poetic passage: memories transfer from the originary creators to the secondary and the tertiary, ad infinitum. Art performance turns those who remember into poets.

How does this poet relate to her poem, remembering the pain of confusion just before writing and the release of tentative clarity with that first verse? The transition from many possibilities to one requires compromise, which tastes like experience. As Rainer Maria Rilke says, poems are not “simply emotions” but “experiences.” “For the sake of a single poem, you must see many cities, many people and Things, you must understand animals, must feel how birds fly,
and know the gesture which small flowers make when they open in the morning.” The poet
sinks in to the cores of those multitudinous beings and creeps out from their nostrils, from
underneath their carpets, from the tips of their wings, and from the middle of “Things.” Yet,
to know is not just to be, but also to be-not. To “know the gesture which small flowers make”
is to imagine being that gesture and to observe the action of a subtle other in the midst of
remembering it. Here Rilke advises, “And it is not yet enough to have memories. You must be
able to forget them when they are many, and you must have the immense patience to wait
until they return.”[101] She is the one to whom the many return, but their comings and goings
never really follow her schedule. And she has no bus to ride on when they are gone.

What to do when the bus is gone? Could one ride on the picture of many buses? In Rilke's
“The Idiot's Song,” he suggests playing with an imaginary ball—it's bouncier than Didi's and
Gogo's hats—while one waits:

Oh look at that beautiful ball over there:
red and round as an Everywhere.
Good that you made it be.
If I call, will it come to me?[102]

Epilogue

A BEAUTIFUL MAN IN A TAILORED JACKET SITS ON A CURB. HE WAITS FOR
THE sunset. While waiting, out of tedium and good habit, he pokes out his right eyeball and
wipes it carefully with a flannel cloth. He examines the eyeball to make sure that it's
immaculate and turns it sideways to watch himself cleaning the ears. That done, he returns the
eyeball to the socket and begins brushing his false teeth—one by one. That done, he twists his
left arm down from its joint, dusts the joint and oils it before he puts the arm back to its place.
Then he takes off his shoes and folds his socks next to the shoes. He crosses his left foot over
the right leg, and then crosses his right foot over his left leg, in order to polish his toenails.
That done, he rotates his neck 172 degrees to the west to observe the day's remaining aura. He
finishes his good-weather ritual just before the sun subsides into the horizon. As he lives near
Griffith Park, L.A., the man will likely perform his theater of routines for about 338.7 days a
year.

I write from the fontanel of this beautiful man, within the soft cacophony of a cranial interval
where the self cannot speak without whispers from others.

Notes

Preface

Subsequent quotations are from pages 91 and 98. Koestler's essay on holons originally
bringing this anthology of biological essays to my attention. By magic or by fluke, this
reference appeared at the right moment and contributed greatly to my preface, which I wrote after completing the rest of the book manuscript.

2. Strictly speaking, Taipei is located in a basin and does not border on the ocean. It is a city on the northern tip of the island Taiwan, which is itself so small that most regions in it are geographically peripheral. In cultural terms, however, Taipei is certainly the most active center in Taiwan.


8. The term “dematerialization” comes from a 1968 article titled “The Dematerialization of Art” by Lucy R. Lippard and John Chandler; see Lucy R. Lippard, Six Years: The De
cmaterialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972 (New York: Praeger, 1973), 42–43. For performance art's position in twentieth-century art, see the useful anthology Theories and
Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings, ed. Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996). See also Chapter 1 for other references.


10. I coin the term “originary performance” to indicate the performance's status as the primary source of those other products of imagination that are inspired by and take off from it. I prefer the adjective “originary” to the more commonly used “original” for two reasons: to stay away from the connotation of originality and to echo other adjectives that indicate a chronological order: preliminary, primary, secondary, tertiary.

Chapter 1. Inscribing Multicentricity

1. See Sunshine and Noir: Art in L.A. 1960–1997, organized by Lars Nittve and Helle Crenzien (Humlebaek, Denmark: Louisiana Museum of Art, exhibition catalog, 1997), 223. The catalog's unpaginated album includes two of Francis's Edge Paintings. Sunshine and Noir was exhibited at the Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center at the University of California, Los Angeles, during the fall of 1998.


4. Philip Auslander holds that late-capitalist commercialism and the mass media have succeeded in commodifying every possible critical art, eliminating any valid distinction between the center and the margin. Political and social critiques must be launched from “within dominant cultural discourses” and run “the necessary risk of being co-opted by them” (see his *Presence and Resistance: Postmodernism and Cultural Politics in Contemporary American Performance* [Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994], 8).

5. André Maurois, Preface to *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings*, by Jorge Luis Borges, ed. Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby, trans. Sherry Mangan (New York: New Directions), ix. Subsequent statements by Bruno and Pascal are from this source, ix-x.

6. I am using the term “decentered” in a literal sense here, meaning voiding or blanking the central space. Decentered and decentering are also key terms associated with poststructuralist theories. For a brief review of these terms in current usage, see *Columbia Dictionary of Modern Literary and Cultural Criticism*, ed. Joseph Childers and Gary Hentzi (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 71–73.


15. The urban history of Los Angeles that I trace here is based primarily on Soja and Scott, “Introduction to Los Angeles: City and Region,” in *The City*, 1–21.


18. There are many studies of the two urban uprisings in L.A. See, for example, Harlan Hahn, “Los Angeles and the Future: Uprising, Identity, and New Institutions,” in *Rethinking Los Angeles*, 77–95.


20. Ibid., 14.


23. The phrase “inferno effect” comes from Baudrillard's “Los Angeles by Night”: “There is nothing to match flying over Los Angeles by night. A sort of luminous, geometric, incandescent immensity, stretching as far as the eye can see, bursting out from the cracks in the clouds. Only Hieronymus Bosch's hell can match this inferno effect” (62). The “politics of location” is used by Todd Boyd in his fascinating article “A Small


27. My formulation of these concepts is inspired by Lisa Lowe's analysis of Asian American identities. She highlights “heterogeneity,” which suggests “the existence of differences and differential relationships within a bounded category”; “hybridity,” which “marks the history of survival within relationships of unequal power and domination”; and “multiplicity,” which designates “the way in which subjects located within social relations are determined by several different axes of power, are multiply determined by the contradictions of capitalism, patriarchy, and race relations.” See *Immigrant Acts*, 67.


30. As Lowe points out, explicating Gramsci's theory: “The reality of any specific hegemony is that, although it may be for the moment dominant, it is never absolute or conclusive” (*Immigrant Acts*, 69).


32. The original translated version of the poem by Guillaume Apollinaire is:

   Come to the edge, he said
   They said: We are afraid
   Come to the edge, he said
   They came
   He pushed them … and they flew


ed. A. A. Bronson and Peggy Gale (Toronto: Art Metropole, 1979), 183–204. According to Rose Lee Goldberg, currently in Britain “there is a preference for the term ‘live art’ because it is more directly descriptive and this is used as frequently as ‘time-based art’; in Australia, ‘performance’ quite specifically refers to work that has originated in the traditions of theater, while ‘performance art’ refers to performance artists with bona fide art-school diplomas” (Performance: Live Art Since 1960 [New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1998], 12).

35. This specific use of “performance” to refer to what was once called “performance art” is different from the more general use of performance in theater studies. David Román offers a succinct definition for the theater studies usage: “A performance stands in and of itself as an event; it is part of the process of production. A performance is not an entity that exists atemporally for the spectator; rather, the spectator intersects in a trajectory of continuous production” (Arts of Intervention: Performance, Gay Culture, and AIDS [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998], xvii). In a different chapter, Román suggests why current practitioners of performance art prefer to drop “the ‘art’ and its subsequent privileging of aesthetics from ‘performance art’ to foreground questions of identity and community. This is particularly true for performers who emerge from oppressed groups who see their work as overtly political in nature” (120). See my Chapter 5 for a more extensive discussion.


37. These multiple disciplines include, following Goldberg's list in Performance, “literature, poetry, theater, music, dance, architecture, and painting, as well as video, film, photography, slides, and text, and any combination of these” (12).

38. As Stiles historicizes, “After World War II, performance by artists emerged almost simultaneously in Japan, Europe, and the United States…. [These artists] resumed the performance work undertaken by every modernist avant-garde from the futurists and to the dadaists… But whereas the performative aspects of the modernist avantgardes had been a marginal aspect of their work, the artists who turned to performance after 1945 made the actions, psychological and social conditions, and cognitive features of the body the primary medium of art, and they developed performance as an independent medium in the visual arts” (“Performance Art,” 679–80). Goldberg also mentions that performance art is “a missing piece in the big picture of art history studies” (Performance, 9).


40. Goldberg, Performance, 11.


46. Soja and Scott, “Introduction to Los Angeles,” 7. See also Mike Davis, “Sunshine or Noir,” in *City of Quartz*, 15–97.


52. Author's interview with Barbara T. Smith (a noted performance artist and a graduate from the UC Irvine art program), Nov. 12, 1998, in Los Angeles. Smith stressed that performance art at Irvine was a student-generated activity and not part of the academic curriculum. I thank Smith for generously sharing her archive of materials on performance art.

54. Arlene Raven, “Womanhouse,” in *Power of Feminist Art*, 48–65. See also the Web project Womanhouse at www.cmp.ucr.edu/womenhouse, which reassesses the issues of Womanhouse through the contemporary lens of Internet culture and multiculturalism. I thank Amelia Jones for reminding me of this valuable reference.


56. Davis, “Sunshine or Noir?” in *Sunshine and Noir*, 71.


58. Author's interview with Anna Homler, Dec. 18, 1997, Los Angeles.


65. Author's interview with Shishir Kurup, Nov. 9, 1998, University of Southern California. Kurup was involved with LATC since 1988, and served as the head of its Asian American Theatre Project from 1989 to 1991, when LATC folded under financial and political pressures.

66. The NEA Four were L.A.'s Tim Miller and John Fleck and New York's Karen Finley and Holly Hughes. See an excellent analysis of the controversy over censorship at the National Endowment for the Arts by Peggy Phelan, “Money Talks, Again,” in *TDR* 35 (Fall 1991): 131–42.

67. The HBO Workspace started producing monthly performance programs around 1996.

69. Supported by a grant from Southern California Studies Center (SC2) at the University of Southern California, I conducted extensive interviews with local performance artists and completed a monograph entitled “Otherness Naturalized: Multicultural Performance Art in Los Angeles.” The monograph is published online at the SC2 web site (www.usc.edu/dept/LAS/SC2). My comments in this paragraph reflect the information collected in these interviews.


75. Amelia Jones suggests that most critical accounts of performance art overstress the redemptive function of performance. She holds that some performances are radical precisely because of their ambivalence toward the social. See Body Art, 247.


78. See Roth, “Toward a History,” and Burnham, “Performance Art in Southern California.”


82. In “Education of an Un-Artist, Part II,” Kaprow mentions that nonart is “lifelike,” and “an art of resemblance” (Essays on the Blurring, 110).


88. I thank Marguerite Waller for reminding me of this. After CalArts, Kaprow moved on to the Art Department of the University of California, San Diego, where he taught many of the artists who became the core of the border arts movement in San Diego. While Kaprow's own art does not center on specific political issues, some of his students, both male and female, have worked on politically pointed performances concerning the U.S.-Mexico border.


91. My descriptions of the installations and performances in Womanhouse are based on Raven, “Womanhouse.”

92. According to Cheri Gaulke, the three founding members of the Woman's Building were Judy Chicago, Sheila de Bretteville, and Arlene Raven. See “Acting Like Women: Performance Art of the Woman's Building,” in Citizen Artist, 15.

93. Ibid., 15. The Feminist Studio Workshop began operation in 1974, the same year the Woman's Building held its first documentary exhibition. In addition, the Woman's Building housed many other feminist organizations, including Womanspace (a women's gallery), the Performance Project (which coordinated women's performing groups), and Women's Improvisation (a theater workshop).

94. Roth, in Amazing Decade, 138.

Peggy Phelan has an extensive argument against this “visibility” strategy in her *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1993). See Chapter 6 for a discussion.


Fox, “Waiting in the Wings,” 60.

I am indebted to Amelia Jones and Marguerite Waller for insisting that I include Eleanor Antin in my discussion of feminist performances in L.A. For an insightful analysis of Antin's Jewish identity, see Lisa E. Bloom, “Rewriting the Script: Eleanor Antin's Feminist Art,” in *Eleanor Antin*, 159–90.


The quest to advertise L.A. as a multicultural paradise continues to this date, witnessed by the colorful banners that suddenly graced the city's surface streets at the turn of the millennium. These banners, identified by names of different neighborhood areas, carry messages like “I am a Latina; I am L.A.”; “We are Different and It's Cool.” I thank Amelia Jones for this reference.


Timothy Martin, “Rocking the Lifeboat,” in *Sunshine and Noir*, 171.


113. As Auslander argues in *Presence and Resistance*: “we cannot afford simply to dismiss artists' movements from the margins to the center or from the avant-garde to the mainstream as ‘selling out’ any more than we can afford to ignore the significance of cultural expression that originates within the mainstream” (4).


118. See *Bodyworks* (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, exhibition catalog, 1975).


122. Quoted by Martin, “Rocking the Lifeboat,” 172.


126. Ibid., 18.


128. Ibid., 55.

129. Ibid., 57, 59.
130. I am inspired by Homi Bhabha's concept of mimicry in “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse,” in Modern Drama: Plays/Criticism/Theory, ed. W. B. Worthen (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1995), 1091–97. A prime case from contemporary U.S. culture that lends credence to my example is that of the African American singer Michael Jackson, who, despite claiming that a disease has altered his skin pigments to appear “white,” has not escaped public censure or ridicule for his act/dilemma.

131. I am citing Foucault's remark: “What the intellectual can do is to provide instruments of analysis, and at present this is the historian's essential role. What's effectively needed is a ramified, penetrative perception of the present, one that makes it possible to locate lines of weakness, strong points, positions where the instances of power have secured and implanted themselves by a system of organization dating back over 150 years” (“Body/Power,” in Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977, ed. Colin Gordon, trans. Colin Gordon, Leo Marshall, John Mepham, and Kate Soper [New York: Pantheon Books, 1980], 62).


Chapter 2. Out of Order


3. I use the term “subaltern” in its broader sense to connote both subjugation and insurgency. See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, In Other Worlds (New York: Methuen, 1987).


8. I am using the phrase “hermeneutic horizons” in the sense defined by Hans-Georg Gadamer as the temporal and experiential conditions that shape my perspective as an interpreter. See Truth and Method, trans. and ed. Garrett Barden and John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1975).


15. The comment appears in Michael Duncan's review of “Sunshine and Noir”: “Given the city's less than stellar art market, local enthusiasm alone can't guarantee artists any wider success, which still seems to depend on a mysterious admixture of powerful New York and European dealers, collectors, curators and writers. While L.A. feeds the international zeitgeist, it continues to nurture many strong artists not quite acceptable (or not yet acceptable) to global power brokers. At the same time, other local artists have achieved success abroad when remaining uncelebrated or largely ignored at home” (Art in America 86, no. 4 [April 1998]: 57).


22. The L.A. artist Keith Antar Mason, whose all-African-American-male troupe, the Hittite Empire, was featured in the 1993 L.A. Festival, pointed out that there was a discretionary fund available shortly after the April 29, 1992, “insurrection”—the term he used. But the fund became unavailable after 1993 (author's interview with Mason, Dec. 17, 1997, Los Angeles). I regret not being able to cover the Hittite's performance, but a preliminary discussion can be found in my monograph “Otherness Naturalized: Multicultural Performance Art in Los Angeles” (www.usc.edu/dept/LAS/SC2).


26. David Joselit makes a similar observation about the catalog's lack of documentation of the videotapes in “Between Objects and Actions,” Art in America 86, no. 11 (Nov. 1998): 86–90, 144.


33. As Marguerite Waller has commented, “There is more than one way to do feminist politics and not provoking the L.A. Times art critic might be one of them, especially if you want to work as a curator in a mainstream institution like LACMA” (personal communication).


39. Kelley also performed his Spirit Collector (1978), a triangular sound box with alleged occult persuasions, to all phantoms' rocking delights in “Beyond the Pink.”


42. Scarry, Literature and the Body, xi, xxv.

43. I am indebted to Amelia Jones's comments on my manuscript for this cautionary note about the “autonomous humanist subject.”

44. Especially relevant to my present argument is Spivak's observation about India's Subaltern Studies group and its continuous deployment of humanist concepts (“Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography,” in In Other Worlds, 197–221).
45. As an example of how the stance of “marginality” can be void of ethical content, George Yúdice cites Richard Rodriguez's *Hunger of Memory*, described as the “écriture” of a marginal subject who writes specifically to silence other subjects who remind him of his own ethnic marginality (“Marginality and the Ethics of Survival,” 222–24).


49. I understand that contemporary art criticism has problematized the distinction between the public and the private. My usage of “public” and “private” here, however, is highly particular and stresses the differentiation of the scale of involvement as well as the agent who sanctions the product. In my definition, the public power of a certain product is given by a mass of others; the private power is self-claimed by the producer.


**Chapter 3. Engendering Other/Selves**

1. I thank Suzanne Lacy for allowing me access to her archive. I am also grateful for her comments on my manuscript. My description of *Car Renovation* is based on my reading of a photographic document in *The Power of Feminist Art*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: Abrams, 1994), 30–31, and a phone conversation with Suzanne Lacy (May 29, 1999). Lacy titled the event *Car Renovation*, but the piece was inadvertently renamed *Pink Jalopy* in *The Power of Feminist Art*. I have adopted Pink Jalopy as the name of the car and retained *Car Renovation* as Lacy's title for the piece.

2. I adopt the term “body/self” from Amelia Jones's *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), which uses it to underline body artists' utilization of their bodies as vehicles of their embodied selfhood and artistic subjectivity. I use the terms “body/self” and “body/subject” more or less interchangeably.


9. The *Great Wall of Los Angeles*, located in a flood-control channel in the Los Angeles River, has employed over 350 inner-city youths over a nine-year period to depict different eras of California history and to make “reappear,” in Baca's words, “the disappeared stories of ethnic populations that make up the labor force which built our city, state, and nation” (Judith F. Baca, “Whose Monument Where? Public Art in a Many-Cultured Society,” in *Mapping the Terrain*, 133).


12. Ibid., 267.


20. Beauvoir, Second Sex, 718.


23. Beauvoir, Second Sex, xx.

24. See Atack's summation of critiques by Michèle Le Doeuff and Toril Moi, in “Writing from the Centre,” 34.


27. From Amelia Jones's recounting of Judith Butler's analysis in Body Art, 43. For Butler's original text, see “Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir's Second Sex.” Yale French Studies 72 (1986): 35–50.


32. I had a conversation/debate with Lacy about this issue when I interviewed her on June 28, 1999, in Los Angeles.


36. Lacy, “Name,” 785.


41. From Lacy's comments on my manuscript.

42. This piece is also identified by a longer title, *The Lady and the Lamb or the Goat and the Hag*; see Roth, “Suzanne Lacy,” 51–52.


54. From the poster for *Three Weeks in May* in Lacy's archive. The comment about L.A. as the “Rape Capital” was cited in Lacy's *Three Weeks in May*, from Nancy Ward, Ad Hoc Committee on Rape, Department of Human Relations, Los Angeles County, 1976.


57. *In Mourning and in Rage* was included in the MOCA's exhibition “Out of Actions.” It was the only piece selected from Lacy's prolific outputs in the 1970s, not to mention her continuous contribution to action art for the past three decades. My descriptions of *In Mourning and in Rage* are based on two sources: Roth, *Amazing Decade*, 112–13; William Peterson, “Mobilizing Communities for Change: Suzanne Lacy's Large-Scale Works,” *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 5, no. 1 (Fall 1990): 203–4.

58. Roth, “Suzanne Lacy,” 46. My information is also based on archival research.


60. My description of the participants is based on Lacy's list of performers and her unpublished manuscript “Women in Transition: Art and Public Policy” in her archive.


62. My discussion of *The Dark Madonna* is based on Lacy's archive, including Lacy's proposal for the project, some symposium records, a flyer and questionnaire for *The Dark Madonna*, responses from the participants, UCLA's original press release, and a press clipping packet.


64. Lacy's mission statement for *The Black Madonna*, n.d.


67. Ibid.


69. Hendrix, “Emotional Conference.”

70. Rico, “Dark Madonna.”

71. This incident is vaguely conveyed in most of the newspaper accounts I read. I have revised my own narrative according to Lacy's recollection of the incident.


73. Carpenter, “Dark Madonna.”

74. Author's interview/conversation with Suzanne Lacy, June 28, 1999, Los Angeles.


76. Rico, “Dark Madonna.”

77. In addition to these core collaborators, Lacy also acknowledges the artists she consulted for the project, including Diane Gamboa, Judy Baca, Yen Lu Wong, Senga Nengudi.


81. Ibid.

82. Ibid., 179–80.

83. Ibid., 182.

84. Ibid., 183–84.

Chapter 4. Elia Arce
A somewhat different and abridged version of this chapter was previously published as “Elia Arce's Performance Art: Transculturation, Feminism, Politicized Individualism” in Text and Performance Quarterly 20, no. 2 (April 2000): 150–81. I thank TPQ for permission to reprint some of the materials here. A note of thanks is also due to TPQ’s editor, Judith Hamera, and to two anonymous reviewers, whose comments helped me deepen my thinking on Arce's art.


3. I use the term “Third World” and later “First World” for their present connotations in cultural criticism, even though these terms are inadequate and reductive. As Diana Taylor comments in “Transculturating Transculturation,” the term “Third World” imposes “a false unity on diverse countries,” whereas the term “First World” “gives a false sense of consensus and cohesion to the dominant societies, and glosses over important oppositional or outcast groups within them” (in Interculturalism and Performance, ed. Bonnie Marranca and Gautam Dasgupta [New York: PAJ Publications, 1991], 73).


5. Alarcón, “The Theoretical Subject(s),” 289.


7. hooks, Feminist Theory, 10.


10. Author’s interview with Arce, Dec. 27, 1997.


18. Roque Dalton was waiting for his execution when the 1965 earthquake in El Salvador crushed the outer wall of his prison. He dug his way out to freedom. See a biographical account by Claribel Alegria posted on the Internet (www.connix.com/~curbston/rdprefs.html).


20. A record of Kim Jones's *rat piece* can be found in *Performance Anthology: Source Book of California Performance Art*, ed. Carl E. Loeffler and Darlene Tong (San Francisco: Last Gasp Press and Contemporary Arts Press, 1989), 424. The piece was performed at Cal State Los Angeles in 1976. Because of the piece, the gallery director Frank Brown lost his job and Kim Jones was charged with cruelty to animals.

21. The figure of 50,000 comes from Arce. According to Mitchell Seligson, there were more than 75,000 Salvadorans killed by 1990 (“El Salvador,” *The 1995 Grolier Multimedia Encyclopedia*, Version 7.0.2, n.p.).


23. I also consulted Arce's documentary photo album. During our interview on November 19, 1998, Arce actually performed the third and fourth action sequences for me.


28. This menu indicated that (1) they might be fed through the bars free of charge, (2) for a token price, the female specimen would perform an “authentic” Guatinaui dance, (3) the male specimen would tell a story in “Guatinaui,” or expose his genital, and (4) both would pose for Polaroids with visitors. See ibid., 143–67.

29. Coincidentally, this label “feed me” echoes the title of a twelve-hour performance, *Feed Me* (1973), by Barbara Smith at the San Francisco Museum of Conceptual Art. Smith stays naked in a room set up with a mattress, a rug, pillows, incense, body oils, perfumes, flowers, shawls, tea, cheese, wine, books, music, and mild drugs. A recording of her voice repeats, “Feed me, feed me.” The visitors go into the room one by one to interact with the artist. Smith, however, defines food as sustenance and she limits the activities only to those she considers food. See *Barbara Smith*, ed. Moira Roth (San Diego: University of California, San Diego, Art Gallery, exhibition catalog, 1974).


32. Author's telephone interview with Arce, March 16, 1998.


39. Arce has published an excerpt of this segment entitled “Mom” in High Performance (Spring 1993): 36–37. My quoted passages are based on this excerpt as well as on my transcriptions from the videotaped document. Arce performed Mom as an independent piece at LACE before she incorporated it in Skin at Highways.


Chapter 5. A Hetero-locus in Process


3. The particular phrase appears in his introduction to The New World Border, 1. But Gómez-Peña has used both adjectives in earlier works.


5. Gómez-Peña, “Colonial Dreams,” 82.

6. Ibid.

7. Gómez-Peña defines Aztlán in his “Glossary of Borderismos”: “The ‘original land’ in Aztec mythology. According to Chicano poets it was located in what now is the U.S. South-West” (in New World Border, 240).


12. Jan Breslauer, “Performance Space to Open Where Highways Meet,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 4, 1989, part 6, 3. Special thanks to Tim Miller and Danielle Brazell, who served as co-artistic directors of Highways from 1999 to the spring of 2000, for answering my various inquiries; to Mary Milelzcik, administrative director and curator of Highways Gallery, for sending me press and archival materials; and to Dan Kwong, who has been on Highways' board of directors since 1991, for sharing his recollections. I should also disclose that I served on the board of directors at Highways from 1997 to 2000. My evaluation of Highways is likely to be favorably biased.


14. Susanna Dakin, “The 18th Street Arts Complex as Anti-Ghetto Art?” *Traffic Report: A Publication of 18th Street Arts Complex* (June 1996): 6. I am indebted to Joan Hotchkis for the information about Dakin's contribution to the 18th Street Arts Complex, because Dakin has preferred to remain anonymous. I interviewed Joan Hotchkis on July 10, 1999, in Santa Monica. Special thanks also to Jan Williamson, the current codirector of the 18th Street Arts Complex, for answering my phone inquiries.

15. At its opening, the tenants in the 18th Street Arts Complex included a video production unit, an electronic café set up to allow interactive performances online internationally, an arts management cooperative, numerous individual artists' studios, the office of *High Performance*, and Highways. See Linda Frye Burnham, “Getting on the Highways: Taking Responsibility for the Culture in the '90s,” *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* (Fall 1990): 269.


20. Ibid., 45. In a related essay, Gómez-Peña has indicated that 1984 was the historical watershed when Chicanos began “a process of redefinition of their relationship with the larger society which led to the shedding of separatism and the creation of multicultural alliances with other Latinos as well as Blacks, Asians, feminists and gays” (“Gómez-Peña,” in California Performance, 62).


22. Ibid., 52.

23. Ibid., 52–53.

24. Ibid., 48–49.

25. Ibid., 46.

26. Ibid., 45.

27. Author's interviews with Tim Miller, Nov. 5, 1998, and Danielle Brazell, July 13, 1999. I also had numerous e-mail and phone communications with Miller, Brazell, Dan Kwong, and David Román, who had served on Highways’ board of directors for several years.


32. Author's interview with Joan Hotchkis, July 10, 1999, in the 18th Street Arts Complex, Santa Monica.

33. See Chapter 1; also Allan Kaprow, Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life, ed. Jeff Kelley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).


40. Ibid., 183.


44. I modify the term from Kate Davy's comment on the “spectatorial communities” constructed by a lesbian performance (“Fe/male Impersonation: The Discourse of Camp,” in *Critical Theory and Performance*, 231–32).

45. Amelia Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 34.

46. For the connection between performative reiteration and semantic instability, I am indebted to Judith Butler's analysis in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

47. The slashed date indicates the year of the piece's first performance, followed by its presentation at Highways (if a different year). Kwong's piece debuted in 1993 at the Japanese American Theatre in downtown L.A.; Uyehara's in 1992 at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London. Even though these particular pieces debuted elsewhere, all the artists have used Highways as an impetus and a testing ground for their work.
48. Author's interview with Dan Kwong, Dec. 12, 1997, 18th Street Arts Complex, Santa Monica.


59. In our interview on December 16, 1997 (at Mark Taper Forum, Los Angeles), Alfaro mentioned that there are three cultures he cannot do without: the gay culture, the Latino culture, and the art culture. In L.A., where different cultural communities tend to be segregated geographically, to participate in these three cultures means to travel from West Hollywood to South Central to the various theaters, galleries, and performance spaces where the artists gather. His remark inspired my concept of traveling, which is also indebted to two other works: James Clifford, “Traveling Cultures,” in *Cultural Studies*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler (New York: Routledge, 1992), 96–116; Teshome H. Gabriel, “Thoughts on Nomadic Aesthetics and Black Independent Cinema: Traces of a Journey,” in *Out There*, 395–410.
60. I had seen many different excerpts from *Downtown* performed live by Alfaro on several occasions between 1996 and 1998. My current description about the Highways version is primarily based on David Román's "*Teatro Viva! Latino Performance and the Politics in Los Angeles,*" in *Acts of Intervention,* 177–201. I regret that no image from Alfaro was available to me by press time.


62. Ibid., 335, 337, 340.

63. Ibid., 346.

64. I thank Joan Hotchkis for sending me a copy of her self-published script, *Tearsheets: Rude Tales from the Ranch,* along with a videotaped excerpt of the performance and a press kit, in addition to granting me interviews and conversations about her work. The 1990 Highways production of *Tearsheets* was directed by Steven Kent, with movement/choreography by Emilie Conrad-Da'oud, production design by Douglas D. Smith, costumes by Lindsay Stewart, projection design by Tu-2, and original composition by Michele Brourman.


66. The comment is the introductory remark on Hotchkis's seven-minute videotape excerpt from *Tearsheets.*


68. All quotations in this paragraph, ibid., 2.

69. Ibid., 2–3.

70. Ibid., 4, 5.

71. Ibid., 25.

72. I saw a live performance of *Exorcising My Mythologies* at Highways in 1997. *Exorcising My Mythologies* was written and performed by Danielle Brazell, codirected with Jamie Burris, original set assemblage by Bill Rangel and Danielle Brazell, and lighting design and technical direction by Jerry Browning. Special thanks to Danielle Brazell for offering me a videotaped version of the piece. All quotations from this piece are my transcriptions from this videotape and my own notes taken during her live performance. I also interviewed Brazell (July 13, 1999, Los Angeles).


75. For an extensive discussion of the evaluative criteria for an art performance, see Chapter 7.

76. I base my comments on a videotape of the performance *Monkhood in Three Easy Lessons* provided by Kwong. The production team for the 1993 performance at Highways included

Dan Kwong, writer, performer, and stage designer; Christine Säng, codirector and cochoreographer; Tom Dennison, lighting design; Trudy Archdale, Don Barrozo, and Eric Moon, music; Joseph Santarromana, videotape production; Jeanette Wrate, live percussion; Bill Eigenbrot, technical direction; Jerry Browning, lighting operator; Gregg Kincaid, sound operator; Natalie Topel, video operator; Jusak Bernhard, Lisa Mene Nemacheck, and Lauren Tom, performers for the videotape sections. All quotations from this performance are my transcriptions from the videotape of the performance.

77. Kwong's “Artist's Statement” was included in the program for the performance at Highways.


79. *Headless Turtleneck Relatives* had its U.S. premiere at Highways in 1993, as part of Highways' “Treasure in the House.” I base my comments on a videotaped document of Uyehara's live performance. All quotations from this work are my transcriptions from the videotape. I also interviewed Uyehara on December 12, 1997, in Santa Monica.


81. I used to sing this song too as a child. Taiwan, where I was born and raised, had been colonized by Japan for fifty years. Both of my parents learned Japanese in their primary schools and one of my uncles became a Japanese citizen through marriage. This personal note suffices to explain the evocative qualities of a song associated with a particular culture, as well as the cultural affinities and antagonism between neighboring countries (through geographical proximity, commerce, even a history of colonization).

82. *Assimilation* was originally written as a twenty-minute work for the first “Treasure in the House” in 1991. It has since developed into a self performance that is an hour and ten minutes and has toured extensively both here and abroad. *Assimilation* is written and performed by Shishir Kurup and directed by Page Leong. I saw a live performance of *Assimilation* at the University of Southern California in 1998. Kurup also offered me a videotape of *Assimilation* in its full-length version and a copy of his unpublished script. In addition, I interviewed Kurup
on November 9, 1998, at USC. All quotations from the performance are based on Kurup's unpublished script.


89. An earlier version of this fable was presented in my performance piece Sonic Capsules: a concert of alphabets marking time, on January 30, 1998, as part of the USC Festival of the Arts, in conjunction with the exhibition “Asian Traditions/Modern Expressions” at the Fisher Gallery, University of Southern California.

Chapter 6. What's in a Name?

This chapter revises and updates my two previous essays on Sacred Naked Nature Girls' Untitled Flesh: “Les Demoiselles d/L.A.: Sacred Naked Nature Girls' Untitled Flesh,” TDR (The Drama Review) 42, no. 2 (Summer 1998): 70–97; and “Renaming Untitled Flesh: Marking the Politics of Marginality,” in Performing the Body/Performing the Text, ed. Amelia Jones and Andrew Stephenson (New York: Routledge, 1999), 199–222. The material is reprinted here by permission of the respective publishers. I thank Mariellen R. Sandford, associate editor of TDR, for her judicious editing. I am grateful to Amelia Jones for her astute comments. Special thanks are also due to the following friends who have read and given me feedback on the first version of this work: Kristine Stiles, Vincent Cheng, Ted Shank, Toti Mercadante O'Brien, and David James.


2. The original reference appears in Job 1:21: “When Job heard of the destruction of his animals and of his sons, he said, ‘Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I

3. In the original biblical context, “Legion” is a name for devils. I am purposely inverting the terms of this parable here. The original parable from Mark 5:9 and Luke 8:30 relates: “When Jesus met the man possessed with devils, in the country of the Gadarenes, he asked him his name. The maniac replied, ‘My name is Legion: for we are many,’ meaning possessed by many devils. Jesus permitted the devils to enter a herd of [Gadarene swine], and the man was cured” (in ibid., 152).

4. Author's interviews with Danielle Brazell, Laura Meyers, and Denise Uyehara, March 28, 1997, and with Brazell, Meyers, Uyehara, Akilah Oliver, and Elia Arce, Oct. 13, 1997, both in Los Angeles. (Unless otherwise indicated, my information about SNNG is based on these interviews.) When I inquired about each member's ethnic background, Meyers replied that she prefers to identify herself with Texas. For her, Texas is an ethnicity. For more on Brazell's and Uyehara's individual work, see Chapter 5.


10. Amelia Jones argues that corporeal and identificational particularities evinced in a performing body have the potential to expose the normative prejudices inherent in modernist/formalist art history and criticism. In Jones's words, “when the body in performance is female, obviously queer, non-white, exaggeratedly (hyper) masculine, or otherwise enacted against the grain of the normative subject (the straight, white, upper-middle-class, male subject coincident with the category ‘artist’ in western culture) the hidden logic of exclusionism underlying modernist art history and criticism is exposed” (Body Art/Performing the Subject [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998], 7).

11. Jon Cruz suggests that “essentialism” can be avoided by “a retreat from systems and histories to the present and the local.” He believes such an epistemological move to the specific “has restored the problem of meaning, retrieved the value of hermeneutics, and brought social and cultural analysis back to an appreciation” for the individual subjects.
12. As Cruz phrases it, “Multiculturalism is, in part, about groups struggling to achieve moral solidarity, a precious good in an era of profound transformation and instability” (ibid., 31).

13. The quotations are from SNNG's “Artistic Statement” and “Company Activities,” both 1993.


15. Ibid., 6, 7, 2, 9.

16. Ibid., 27, 19.


20. The phrase “carefully blind” alludes to Phelan's astute remark on vision and blindness:

   “Taking the visual world in is a process of loss: learning to see is training careful blindness. To apprehend and recognize the visible is to eliminate as well as absorb visual data”  
   *Unmarked*, 13.


22. Ibid., 8.


24. I thank Amelia Jones for her contribution to this insight.

25. Phelan uses the conflation, “I/eye,” to analyze the intricate relations between subjectivity (I) and the visual faculty (eye) discussed by Lacan (see *Unmarked*, 20). I understand that many other scholars have used such a conflation, but I am alluding specifically to Phelan's usage here.


27. Dolan discusses Wilke, Schneemann, and Leslie Labowitz in her article: “Wilke, Labowitz, and other artists attempt to use nudity in performance to create female subjectivity, but they are caught in the gender-polarized terms and objectifying strictures of the performance apparatus” (ibid., 159).


32. I thank Amelia Jones for pointing out the relevance of primitivism to my argument here.


37. Mellow, Picasso, 4–5.


40. Steinberg, Other Criteria, 173.


43. Unpublished interview by Elysia Paladino with SNNG, March 26, 1996. I thank Paladino for allowing me to use this document.

44. Again a reference to the Bible. The Hebrew prophets denounce Jezebel, the daughter of the King of Tyre and wife of King Ahab, because she introduces different types of worship to
the Israelites. Like Medea, Jezebel commits murder to help her husband, King Ahab. Later King Jehu orders that Jezebel be thrown out the window as a punishment for her flirtation with him. Her body is eaten by dogs. See Fulghum, *Dictionary of Biblical Allusions*, 129–30.


55. Unpublished interview with SNNG by Paladino.


59. Ibid., 22.

**Chapter 7. Kinesthetic Transmutation of Theatricality**

A revised and expanded version of the osseus labyrint section of this chapter has been published as “Cyborgs in Mutation: osseus labyrint's Alien Body Art,” *TDR* 45, no. 2 (Summer 2001): 145–68. Portions of the text in the Oguri section have been published as “Oguri and Renzoku,” *Theatre Forum* 19 (Summer/Fall 2001): 90–96.

1. Author's interviews with Johanna Went, May 20, 1998, and Oct. 20, 1999, Los Angeles. All biographical information about Went and quotations from her are based on these two interviews unless otherwise indicated.


3. Author's interviews with Sherwood Chen (a dancer who works frequently with Oguri), Dec. 11, 1997; with Oguri and Roxanne Steinberg, Nov. 10, 1998, and Sept. 23, 1999; all in Los Angeles.

4. Author's interview with Hannah Sim and Mark Steger, Nov. 8, 1998, Los Angeles. I also had numerous e-mail exchanges with Sim and Steger. The citation about osseus labyrint's artistic investigation comes from the company brochure. As artistic directors for osseus labyrint, Sim and Steger have collaborated with many local artists since they moved to L.A. Sim and Steger usually print their company name in lowercase bold type, but I have eliminated the bold for typographic consistency.


8. Ibid., 220, 221.
9. I cite the phrase “montage of attractions” from Sergei Eisenstein, who coined it to comment on his theater production of Enough Stupidity in Every Wise Man. Eisenstein gave up the stage for film a year after he wrote the essay “The Montage of Attractions.” One reason might be that, as an aesthetic effect, the montage of attractions is better achieved by the film medium than by theater. See excerpts of Eisenstein's “The Montage of Attractions” (1923), and “The Montage of Film Attractions: The Model Actor” (1924), in Twentieth-Century Theatre: A Sourcebook, ed. Richard Drain (New York: Routledge, 1995), 88–90; 91–94.


13. Oguri and Renzoku was formed by Oguri and Roxanne Steinberg in 1993. Original members included Lakshmi Aysola, Boaz Barkan, Jamie Burris, Dona Leonard, Kaoru Sasaki, and Laura Meyers. So far, the only ensemble piece choreographed and directed by Oguri but billed without the name Renzoku was the stream of consciousness (the piece discussed in this chapter). One reason is that Sherwood Chen (a major performer in this piece) has never formally joined Renzoku, although he has frequently performed with Oguri and Renzoku since 1996. Chen trained at Min Tanaka's farm, a base for Body Weather Laboratory, in Japan.

14. Most of the artists I interviewed for this book made similar comments on the relative freedom afforded by L.A. in practicing art the ways they want because there is no established art tradition in this city. Linda Burnham made a specific comment about the combination of day jobs and serious art in her article “High Performance, Performance Art, and Me,” The Drama Review 30, no. 1 (Spring 1986): 15–51.


16. I follow Oguri in using the Western custom to cite the names of the Japanese artists by giving their first name first and their family names last. Naoyuki Oguri goes only by his family name in his dance pieces. In my interview with Oguri on November 10, 1998, he mentioned, in particular, the influences of Genpei Akasegawa of Hi Red Center and Tatsumi Hijikata of Ankoku Butoh. Oguri was not familiar with the Gutai group and he heard about Kazuo Ohno, another master choreographer associated with Ankoku Butoh, only much later.


27. In our phone interview on December 2, 1999, Went mentioned that she had never seen a production of *Ubu Roi* and that she only remembered reading the play years ago.

28. Pity and fear are of course the well-known Aristotelian concepts concerning the tragic effect. I cite the less discussed pair—“laughter and danger”—from Artaud's “Metaphysics and the Mise en Scène”: “The contemporary theater is decadent because it has lost the feeling on
the one hand for seriousness and on the other for laughter; because it has broken away from gravity, from effects that are immediate and painful— in a word, from Danger” (42).

29. Lauren Versel, *Portrait of Johanna Went* (Los Angeles: Woman's Building, 1989). The video was supplied to me by Went.


37. Ibid.

38. Ibid.

39. Ibid., 20.


44. In Harpham's own words: “Most grotesques are marked by such an affinity/antagonism, by the co-presence of the normative, fully formed, ‘high’ or ideal, and the abnormal, unfomed, degenerate, ‘low’ or material” (*On the Grotesque*, 9).

45. From Versel, *Portrait of Johanna Went*. 


55. Harold F. Brooks notes on the “triple Hecate's team” in the Arden Shakespeare; “She was Hecate (or Proserpina) in Hades; Diana (and occasionally Lucina) on earth; and Luna (or Phoebe or Cynthia) in the heavens.” See William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, ed. Harold F. Brooks (London: Methuen, 1979), 125.


57. This phrase came to my mind after I saw Linglot on Hugo's terrace, but John O'Brien also used it while commenting on the performance in our brief postshow conversation.


59. I saw a performance of *Fu Ru I (sift)#2… Behind Eyeball* at La Boca on February 24, 1995. The dancers in this piece included Oguri, Boaz Barkan, Jamie Burris, Dona Leonard, Yvonne Toni Papanek, Kaoru Sasaki, Robert Scott, and Roxanne Steinberg, with set design
by Oguri and lighting by Oguri, Boaz Barkan, and Joel Shapiro. Since then I've been following the group's works and have seen all the performances discussed here live.

60. Behind Eyeball, performed for a weekend (October 6–8, 1995) in the State Playhouse at Cal State L.A., had choreography by Oguri, live sound score by Paul Chavez, lighting by Morleigh Steinberg, and dancers including Boaz Barkan, Jamie Burris, Dona Leonard, Oguri, Kaoru Sasaki, and Roxanne Steinberg.

61. See Klein's analysis of the prominent Butoh techniques in “The Buto Aesthetic and a Selection of Techniques,” in her Ankoku Butō, 25–54.

62. I saw the world première of the stream of consciousness in La Boca on September 11, 1998. The production was directed by Oguri, with lighting by Asako Tsunoda, sound by Robert Scott, guitar music by Arnie Saiki, and dancers Oguri, Jamie Burris, and Sherwood Chen. The piece subsequently toured to London, Glasgow, and Dublin in 1998. According to Sherwood Chen, he started the piece by running vigorously in place for about ten minutes working with his breath before most spectators entered La Boca. Since I stayed outside for a while watching Oguri, I missed Chen's running action.

63. In numerous press materials and journalistic reviews, Oguri is identified as a “Butoh master.” In Oguri's “Artist's Statement,” he describes his encounter with the Butoh founder Tatsumi Hijikata before he joined Min Tanaka's company, Mai-Juku. As he writes, his initiation into dance came from observing his father's sweaty body at work, a feeling of unspeakable nostalgia for which Hijikata later gave him a name: “It is Dance.”

64. For a commentary on this event, see Nam June Paik, “To Catch Up or Not to Catch Up with the West: Hijikata and Hi Red Center,” in Japanese Art after 1945, 77–81.


70. See “Historical and Descriptive Notes” on the Butoh Web site www.fringeware.com/subcult/Butoh.html.
71. Munroe, “Revolt of the Flesh,” 190.

72. Cited in ibid., 189.


74. From the information about BWL's workshops and residencies in the press packet provided by Oguri.


76. See Paul Schimmel, “Introduction,” in *Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object 1949–1979* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, exhibition catalog, 1998), 31. According to Schimmel, the French action artist Yves Klein has attributed the source of his “anthropométries” (body paintings) to this image, which he witnessed on his 1953 visit to Hiroshima. Neither Tanaka nor Oguri, it should be noted, has mentioned the influence of this image on BWL, and, of course, it is impossible to isolate a single image as the catalyst for all the post-Hiroshima Japanese art forms.


79. My image of the fireflies is inspired by Oguri's story of the Obon holidays in Japan, a week-long celebration in August in commemoration of the ancestral dead. People carve animal-shaped potatoes, with toothpicks as legs, and then put the animals in the water at the end of the week, so that the dead ancestors can ride the animals to the ocean. Legend has it that exactly after Obon, all the fireflies suddenly disappear.

80. For this production the lighting designer was Morleigh Steinberg and the costume designer, Roxanne Steinberg.

81. I pay homage to Gertrude Stein for the concept of syncopation here. She writes, “The thing that is fundamental about plays is that the scene as depicted on the stage is more often than not one might say it is almost always in syncopated time in relation to the emotion of anybody in the audience” (“Plays,” in *Lectures in America* [New York: Random House, 1935], 93).


85. Sim and Steger founded osseus labyrint in 1989 in San Francisco. A year later, the sculptor, designer, and composer Barron Storey and the musician Todd Herman joined the group. Storey and Herman chose to stay in the San Francisco Bay area, but they still perform with Sim and Steger occasionally. I reviewed the piece described (THEM) for Theatre Journal 52, no. 3 (Oct. 2000): 399–401.

86. The picture was actually made from a Polaroid of the Sixth Street Bridge and then manipulated in Photoshop to simulate a painting. The spectral figure in front is a reversed image of Sim. The comment “The truth is out there” comes from Fox TV's popular series The X Files.


88. Mark Steger, e-mail to author, March 14, 1999.

89. The partnership of Sim and Steger as osseus labyrint recalls the collaboration of another heterosexual art team: Marina Abramović and Uwe Laysiepen (known as Ulay). Like Sim and Steger, Abramović and Ulay resemble each other physically; their collaborative work also rests crucially on their life and career partnership. Despite these similarities, osseus labyrint's alien body art deals with a conceptual project larger than the sum of its two founders-directors, whereas Ulay/Abramović made the artist couple's relationships a central issue in its performances. For a study of Ulay/Abramović, see C. Carr, “A Great Wall,” in On Edge, 25–48.

90. See E. Peter Volpe, “Evolution,” and C. K. Chai, “Mutation,” both in The 1995 Grolier Multimedia Encyclopedia, Version 7.0.2. I also acknowledge Sim and Steger's challenge to my previous understanding of mutation and evolution. Their input improved my manuscript and made my research delightful.

91. I saw this performance live at Highways, on May 25, 1998, when it was performed at the opening benefit for Highways' tenth season.

92. For a quick introduction to the movie Them! (1954), directed by Gordon Douglas, see the Web site www.us.imdb.com/Title?0047573. The Web site's tagline for the movie goes: “A horror horde of crawl-and-crush giants clawing out of the earth from mile-deep catacombs!” I thank my friend Peter Bleszynski for reminding me of Them!


95. See Philip Auslander's From Acting to Performance: Essays in Modernism and Post modernism (New York: Routledge, 1997) for an assessment of Orlan; for Stelarc's most recent
cyborg experiments, see “Extended-Body: Interview with Stelarc,” by Paolo Atzori and Kirk Woolford and posted on the Internet site www.ctheory.com/a29extended_body.html. I thank Moira Roth for bringing my attention to this site. Ron Athey also compares Sim and Steger with Stelarc and Orlan in their art of “the body's obsolescence” (“Body Language,” LA Weekly, Jan. 28, 1999: included in osseus labyrint's press kit).


97. I saw The Tragedy of Macbeth at Highways on February 6, 1999. The production included performers Mark Steger, Hannah Sim, David Hardegree, Carol Cetrone, Peter Schroff, Marianne Magne, and Illya Brodsky, as well as musicians Ann Perich and Daniel Day. As there is no adequate video documentation of the show, I thank Sim and Steger for their help in refreshing my memory of the performance in our interview on January 25, 2000. All quotations from this show are based on their unpublished script.


99. Sim and Steger identify the horn as “Eartrumpet” in their script for Mac Beth. The “Eartrumpet” substitutes for the “Crown” in this episode. Coincidentally the actor Peter Schroff is deaf in one ear. The “ear trumpet” was used as a hearing aid in the past.

100. Athey, “Body Language.”


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