

Between Mess and Method: Performance Art Economix/Ttues

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Abstract

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Cultural Economix as Performance Art will draw on a decade of cultural organizing framed as performance art by queer and trans feminist performance artists and cultural activists in New York City (USA). Using examples such as the “imaginary institution” Brooklyn International Performance Art Foundation, Esther Neff parses and describes methodological and practical tactics devised and developed particularly by queer, trans, and GNB/GNC feminists in the USA to support “our own” work and dismantle extractive, coercive, capitalist cultural economies.

Keywords

Alternative models of bodies

Commodification

Method

Performance art history

Queerness

To ruin, to ruffle, to destroy, to dismantle, deconstruct, blur, obscure, split and fray, to spread and scatter, spin out of control and smash against the wall, these may be the instincts and energies first associated with us. Covered in glitter, eating a raw pig’s heart, hot-gluing rose petals to her asshole, making a knee-deep mess of eggs and vomit, performance artists freak out the norm(ativit)ies with our symptomatic death-throes, our flesh, and our abreactive counter-cultural flailing. As with “feminism,” some elements of each “wave” or “movement” or “eruption” of

performance art may cool like lava into hard material advertising aesthetics, documentary images suitable for museum shows, and single-square paragraphs in historicizing academic handbooks. Truly effective acts—we are told—are ephemeral, largely futile, any real “critical” capacities doubtful. Writes Chantal Mouffe (likewise in order to counter such arguments), “every critical gesture is quickly recuperated and neutralized by the forces of corporate capitalism” (2013).

AQ1

AQ2

Yet, actions that criticize, theorize, transform, construct, tactically address, strategize, model, demonstrate, program, situate, describe, frame, archive, index, identify, recognize, resource, design, deliberate, pull it together, take a stand, are also performance practices. We are also sending emails, writing and reading texts, giving feedback, holding meetings, forming panels and working groups, putting a new roll of toilet paper in the bathroom, texting directions from the airport, formatting excel sheets, making and accepting proposals, lettering signage. Further, these actions can be just as, if not more so, disruptive of, and, alternative to dominant norms and codes.

I don’t want to reify that same old and easy “radicality as chaos vs. the establishment as order” paradigm. I want to avoid ascription of wildness, creativity, immaturity, and “the natural” to “the feminine” and/or “the queer” and the “methodological,” “sane,” “tactical,” “theoretical,” and “rational” to the masculine, straight, square. This binary, however, roughly that between “mess” and “method,” (interrelated with other familiar binaries, e.g. male and female, natural and ordered, and so on) are maintained and reproduced everywhere, even by “queer and trans feminists.” For instance, I have been advised by this volume’s editors to re-write this piece as an “artist memoir;” they tell me it is “not necessary to go into the theoretical sections.” They want a binary structure that positions two spheres (“mess” and “method”), sectileated, reinforced, and clarified, even though my thesis is that messes and methods are not mutually exclusive, and they want my “personal” story, not my dialectical (political?) participations.

This piece of writing—and my work at large—attempts to practice ways in which embodied mess-making and strategic method-making are entangled. Further, methodological mess-making and messy methodologizing drive what I see as performance art’s most pertinent and radical ways of situating “cultural economics,” staging “economixtures” that resist and trans*gress (Grey and Klein 2016) the

capitalist mentalities, norms, and codes that both commodify and devalue our bodies, exchanges, and ideas.

Mess

In 2011 I am standing behind the bar at Grace Exhibition Space in Brooklyn, NY talking with a young womxn who has recently graduated from an MFA program in “visual arts performance.” She is attempting to compliment me on the closing of a performance art exhibition. She says something like “it’s so great to see these female performance artists getting the recognition they deserve. I’ll bet you can get a big fat grant now.” This year, “performance art” is on the rise, popularized by the success of Marina Abramović’s *The Artist is Present* (2010–2011) at MoMA, and one doesn’t need grad school to be well aware of what Nancy Fraser describes as “polarized bids” for redistribution vs. those for recognition (2001). In confrontation with this nice young woman at Grace Space, I react badly, declaring that we are not working for such des(s)erts, our so-called piece of the pie, that this project is “subterfugal” and that not all of us identify as “female.” I explain that the cultural practices she is witnessing here are self-immolations rather than business strategies. We do not recuperate our losses! I employ mixed metaphors involving pie throwing and pratfalls, capital investments flooding markets, cascade failures. Her eyes narrow and harden.

AQ3

My “pro-mess” attitude at this time is in no way new, or surprising coming from a “queer feminist performance artist.” That toilet-reading tome *20th Century Art Book* notes in its entry for Carolee Schneeman that “Performance Art, which could be neither bought nor sold, offered a radical alternative to the art market” (1999). In the accompanying photo, Schneeman stares wildly out at us, her face and body smeared with substances, a horn sticking out from her forehead. Clearly, Schneeman reifies age-old ways in which the “female” has been seen as feral and grotesque, embodying forms of “unruliness” (Mintz 2007), “leakiness” (Shildrick 1997) “abjection” (Kristeva 1982). Pro-mess attitudes are predictable as expectations that womxn and queers make art solely via “antitheoretical intuition” (Hunter 1993).

By 2012, my collaborators and I have lost our space in a 50-person arts and activism co-operative and eventually (long story) we re-locate our operations to a small garage “lab,” (Panoply Performance Laboratory 2012–2018). It is seeming less and less viable to limit our activities to some quarantined thrashing and screaming, neither to some respectable grant petitions. I want structural change, real agency, not just a lose-lose decision between self-mutilating mess and packagable,

branded “Performance Art” defined and theorized by already-authorized and empowered gatekeepers.

Method

For the second time in my life, I travel abroad, spending my life savings on plane tickets to Berlin where folks are organizing a project called Month of Performance Art, entirely without any institutional support. Inspired, I decide that we too, New York City performance artists, can manifest something similar; we can organize *as performance in and of itself*. The following year, I convict some 300+ performance artists to a feat of mass self-organization. We hope (variously) to stage a show of force, a declaration of existence, an apparitional appearance of the non-discipline “performance art,” a test of our mutualistic systems, a methodological theorization of how we may be able to operate “otherly wise.”

In a letter to “the community at large,” initiating *Brooklyn International Performance Art Festival* (2013), I write that “this festival will be a collaborative performance” (Neff 2012) describing the organizing structure as “a small core team of individuals lighting the big pink match in this room full of gas” and continuing on, at some length, to outline tensions between order and chaos, ideological coherence and “open-source” practices. I emphasize negations: de-competition, de-hierarchization, anti-racism, and anti-capitalism as well as positives: process-based flexibility (“performative fluxstructure”), in-person social interaction, and the general value of intentionality, that is, doing something on purpose, for a purpose, and aligning these purposes, reasons, ethics, motivations, with consideration and anticipation of potential implications, affects, and consequences of the actions done/purposed/proposed.

My collaborators and I carefully select and attempt to mandate what we believe to be “ethical”—yet not too coercive—structural elements: No two events shall conflict or compete with one another. No space may charge a flat/hard fee at the door or any fee for artists to “apply” or participate. No artist will be rejected, no organizer can be rejected, no definition of what “performance art” definitively “is” will be permitted. We try to use a wiki (which quickly becomes beset by bots and malware) to organize ourselves. I use funds from a somewhat poorly attended potluck benefit (around \$200) to print booklets listing all of the shows and projects for the month.

Messiness

Anya Liftig is braver than I am. She climbs up and stands on a stool during a talk with RoseLee Goldberg, organized by Hyperallergic in Brooklyn NY, circa 2015. Why, Liftig asks Goldberg, does PERFORMA continue to commission performances from famous visual artists (who do not usually work in performance) and ignore “actual” performance artists. Did you send anyone to see the work being made during BIPAF? Liftig asks. “No,” replies Goldberg, because “so much of the underground work is just repeating the messes made in the ‘70’s.”

Through this little anecdote and some speculation into Goldberg’s perspectives, we can discuss several types of mess. There is the mess that performance artists make of Performance Art (capital letters) as an art historical trajectory and “period.” There is the mess that performance art makes of cultural paradigms regarding *who* is authorized to make, criticize, theorize, and define “performance art,” and the mess that performance art makes of art-as-luxury-objects via constant de-subjection and de-objectification of bodies and bodilies (Jones 1998). There is also literal mess.

The failures of performance artists and performance art “workings” to appear as property, as commodity, as subjects of legible discourse or objects of qualifying and authorized attentions, generate constant “critical” accusations of performance art and artists as uneducated/raw/unskilled (primitive), foolish/weak/hysterical (feminine), weird/bad/wrong/disgusting/perverted (queer) and immature/naïve/childish/uneducated regarding art history and what has “already been done” (infantile).

On the other hand, “progressive” and “subversive” (-ly branded) artists and works that do carry the *formal* and *modal* properties and qualities of respectable subjects and legible objects are, in fact, quite consumable by museums and arts historians. Thus, mainstream (ing) institutions and authorized cultural overseers believe they already own and understand works that represent “feminist” and “queer” trajectories. By 2018, “Feminist Art” and more recently “Queer Art” (see *Trigger: Gender as a Tool and a Weapon at the New Museum*, 2017) have largely been scrubbed of presence and mess. Bell hooks writes that “the commodification of difference promotes paradigms of consumption wherein whatever difference the Other inhabits is eradicated, via exchange, by a consumer cannibalism that not only displaces the Other but denies the significance of that Other’s history through a process of decontextualization” (1992).

For performance art, context is everything. Modes of production and exhibition, demonstration and protest, forms of gathering and event, spiritual ritual, socio-political configurations, and cultural practices are increasingly (and ancestrally) integrated with “performance-as-art.” Right before *BIPAF* started, Jen Ortiz interviewed a handful of performance art people—including myself—about whether or not performance art can be “collected” and still maintain its “original message” (2012). At that time, I responded that performance artists can (and often do) deal with their own participation in existing economic structures. Regarding this intentional “dealing with,” US American artworld folks often refer to Andrea Fraser’s performance prostituting herself to a collector, which resulted in the video *Untitled* (2003). Since 2003 however, such practices have only increased, deepened, and proliferated, including my own most recent project, a collaboration with my mother on a “biocultural” food and labor system in St. Louis (MARSH), and my solo work with “affective transaction,” *Affaction Research Center* (2015–). As I revise this essay in 2019, Decolonize This Place, Chinatown Art Brigade, and W.A.G.E. (each operating themselves as branded artists collectives, leveraging and participating in their own economies of attention and power), mount performative protest against the Whitney Museum’s “artwashing” and its institutional, economic complicity with ecocide and genocide. At a town hall meeting, Alicia Grullón describes the movement as “art-historical,” adding, “You will be reading about this in textbooks to come” (Greenberger 2019).

Methodological Mess

In 2018 a compendium of performative entities, including BIPAF and the platform PERFORMANCY FORUM (both “performative organizations” I mobilize), establish a temporary collective of 20 performance artists under the moniker *CIVIC REFLEX/REFLEJO CIVICO* (Neff 2018), as an “institutional” performance in and of itself. As a part of this yearlong project, another collective, called *Undoing and Doing*, emerges through the collaborative practices of Lorene Bouboushian, who brings others (some of whom are also individual members of the original *CIVIC REFLEX* collective of 20) into their Movement Research residency. Myself as lead organizer/artist of *CIVIC REFLEX* and Bouboushian as lead artist/organizer of *Undoing and Doing* both use institutional forms (both fabricated/staged and “legitimate/pre-existing” ones) to position ourselves as both responsible and decentralized, administrative and queer-parental (né maternal or paternalistic/patriarchal), dissident and under-standing. Individualistic and competitive modes of production as well as authorities, hierarchies, artist-curator divides, and institutional engagements are hereby messed up, confused, and

reformed, blending with “daily life” and the “private” spheres of emotional labor, caretaking, and family. This sort of practice is not “new,” it is part of a queer and trans feminist legacy (see, for example, Lesbian Art Project’s *The Oral Herstory of Lesbianism (Oral)* 1979).

Yet Goldberg is also right: Performance art(ists) are messy and may not belong in sterile whiteboxes. Intertwined with clearly classist and racist cultural conflicts staged by the normative spaces and environments of artworldings (galleries are retail sites, designed for the comfort and cultural preferences of an elite, wealthy, mostly white demographic of consumer-collectors) are the practical needs of performance art and its messes. A performance art space ideally has a shower. It should also be possible to perform naked, to have fire and substances inside, and for the artists to participate in structuring access and bodily relations to and with(in) their workings. The walls and floors of the Panoply Performance Laboratory (aforementioned) became caked with blood, honey, and wax. Artists light smoke bombs inside. The smell of piss and sage lingers. Honey McMoney burns a hole right into the floor, Keijaun Thomas covers herself with Elmer’s glue and flour, Jon Konkol irons a fish and then flings the mass into the wall spreading charred guts everywhere, Marcelline Mandeng brings in compost and rotting meat, Christen Clifford fills the air with tufts of fur. There is no stage, nor are there tickets, nothing but beer (suggested donation) is for sale.

AQ4

AQ5

We work where we live, we make messes where we eat and sleep. This literal messiness further bespeaks the blurring and bleeding of “artworkings” out beyond their cleanly identifiable and clearly labeled, disciplined object/subject-hoods. Performance art is not just an object of experience, it is also all of the ways it is made and its aftermath, its affects, its remains, indices, and marks made, the injuries sustained. Performance art becomes a *form of life* for those who practice, theorize, and organize it. Here, we can only petition for more mess, more bleed-out through and around “the work itself” into considerations such as where materials are sourced, what sorts of persons are considered performers “in” the work, what, where and how and via whom performance art occurs.

Performance art mess, of any kind, is not to be contained, cordoned off, curtailed, or controlled, but rather acknowledged and more considerately made and spread, a’ la Alexis Shotwell’s arguments for starting from a place of default toxicity. We are indeed damaged and damaging, sickened (and #sickening), contaminated and

contaminating in ways we cannot avoid (2016), but we organize and support one other through platforms like “queer trash” (Kamerman and Foster 2016–), and “human trash dump.” (Lamb and Bellows/Griess 2015–2018); all we can do is make messes in the ways we believe are correlated with “our own” (self-aligning) value(s).

Methods

Throughout 2018, PPL becomes home to an array of nine thinktanks, collectively entitled *9 PROPOSITIONS*. Framed initially by the author of this essay and launched during Emergency INDEX’s release party at The Kitchen, the thinktanks mess with who and how thinking is performed. A “method” is a way of doing something that has been developed reiteratively over time, involving processes that attempt to correlate intentions with actions, then analyze these actions in light of their experienced affects and consequences, forming modes of relationship which are then used to adapt intentions to inform further actions (and so on, indefinitely). We can see methodologies operating across scales; from micro-relations between bodies and “within” the performance work, through meso-scale forms of event and organization, and resonating out through macro-scale affiliations with civic, social, and political movements.

Through such configurations, performance artists demand the agency and authority to *theorize*. Theory is not just the “discursive apparatus” that value, frame, and contain our practices, theorization processes are performed via and as the work itself (Neff and Gluzman 2020). Without theorization, we can make neither methods nor messes.

We theorize, for example, forms of deliberate payment of attention and attendance-to, via acts of paying attention. When audience members make (free) appointments to sit with Dominique Duroseau (2017), the methodological *situation* of contexts designed specifically for Duroseau’s work are correlated with intentions to increase socio-cultural attention to emotional labor, caretaking, and support. Methods for situating artists and spectators and for recognizing representations and responsibilities are here revised and re-made, adapting to the needs of those present rather than punishing any presented “weakness” or “unfitness of form” (disqualification) as do patriarchal, social Darwinist, capitalist paradigms. Here, affections and attentions are not “paid” in exchange for goods, services, titillation, or other properties of experience, but rather used to methodologically hold, theorize, and substantiate personal experience, to increase feelings and psycho-cultural states of (self)worth and value.

Nurturant methodologies—through which artists ‘take care’ of those present and those present ‘take care’ of the artists—involve inter-personal, collaborative acts and socialities that swing definitions of “value” away from capitalism and towards meaningfulness, away from legal tender and towards tenderness as vehicles for exchanges and trans*-actions. Social gatherings around performance art combat forms of “collective self-hatred and shame” experienced by those who are societally feared or outcast (Benhabib 1995) by valuing vulnerable bodies and attending to persons not as commodities but as agentic entities carrying ideas, experiences, and knowledges worthy of attention, time, and energy. Hereby, economies of attention and cultural capital are transformed into sensitive, relational economix(tures).

For example, Feminist Art Group (FAG), lead by IV Castellanos, directly replaces toxic masculinities and hetero-normativities with trans-masculine ethos and bodies via collaborative, task-based performance, materializing positive and personal versions/visions of masculinity. Castellanos writes in a propositional text for Feminist Art Group’s participation in the project *CIVIC REFLEX/REFLEJO CIVICO*: “Masculine of centered folx can look at each other and know. Holding to manage to stay on. Holding close but not too tight but not too light but tighter than with someone else.” (2018) The experiential value of this work operates through its performed refusal of underlying gender expectations, rejecting both dominance and submission, valuing both knowings and unknowing, enabling both tactical holdings and lettings-go. Such replacements and reconstructions are visible in concrete exchanges of cultural resources and values sans capital(ist) value(s) and in performative (p)articulations of cultural economix that alternate and queer forms of evaluation and value-assignment.

That’s Messed Up

In 2017, Leili Huzaibah and I (under the name “BIPAF” and “PERFORMANCY FORUM”) organize a conference entitled *JUST SITUATIONS*. *JUST SITUATIONS*’ framing text declares the intention to authorize and explore performative modes of production and distribution as situational performances in situ. Huzaibah and I identify “justice” as a generative motivational value, drawing attention to tactical processes of performance-making that see themselves as actualizing “just” (as in “right” and as in “merely”) situations. Framing text cited Homi Bhabha’s statement “Justice, it is said, must not only be done, it must be seen to be done” and Hannah Arendt’s “Nothing and nobody exists in this world whose very being does not presuppose a spectator,” asking *whose witness, whose appearances, whose sights and situations, are deemed as of value and evaluative to and of justice?* Further, we

invite performance makers to research and stage “just” relations, especially relations involving consumption, spectatorship, transaction, and judgment.

JUST SITUATIONS was very partially funded through an “access equity” crowd-funding campaign and was only able to reimburse out-of-town artists for their travel. Though full press and marketing was performed, a single work from *JUST SITUATIONS*, received article-length critical attention (that of Miao Jiaxin, a straight, cis-male artist with some existing clout). One of the few press appearances headlines the project kindly but skeptically as “prodding participants on performance and politics” (Sutton 2017). After the convention, performance art community member Polina Riabova also published a personal account of her experience with the project (2017). Yet it is not the financial failings of this project or its “cultural invisibility” that are most disappointing, rather the failure of the forms of the “convention” as a whole to move beyond reproduction of the dichotomy between (1) individual artists seeking capital through mainstreaming and (2) cultural values seeking forms of self-recognition enculturated otherwise.

For example, *JUST SITUATIONS* largely failed to prevent normative production of organizational hierarchies and individually delineated artists and “performance objects.” Elaine Thap, Chloë Bass, and Raki Malhotra are among those who did (and often do) move in tactical and methodological directions, situating forms of performance that negotiate sights and sites; Thap constructed a performance in situ with those present, Malhotra brought people to her apartment and situated affectively stimulating emotional and social processes, Bass held a dinner and discussion with printed cutlery. Raha Behnam, Danielle Abrams, Sophia Mak, and others situated participatory actions and personal, poignant moments of collective intimacy and collaboration. Karl Cooney dedicated themselves to the supportive role of providing documentation. Quite a few of the involved artists, however, persisted in perceiving the overarching structures and situation(s) as an “opportunity” to present a 20-to-45-minute solo and self-contained performance work to be consumed by passive audience-observers (and presumably, ideally/hopefully, by authorized critics and artworld spectators). Further, all of the organizational and administrative labor, selection processes, and framing textualizations were performed by two unpaid organizers while a third handled housing; the organizational processes became default due to exhaustion and tended towards exploitation of (womxn’s) labor.

It can be judged that even when such performance art “pieces” and “modes of production” involve carefully situated participatory and conceptual elements,

exhibit the work of intersectionally “marginalized” artists, are made by persons who care a lot for each other and little for recognition, and/or occur within and as off-market contexts, they (at least partially) fail to *structurally* queer and transition value(s) and engender “Otherly wise” forms of value.

Such conferences, festivals, and platforms, common to performance art communities from Houston to Accra are often attempting mobilizations aligned Emily Roysdon’s oft-used quote about her queer activism and art: “we are not protesting what we don’t want, we are performing what we do want” (2009). Yet, it remains to be seen if what “we” (variously) do want is political solidarity or individual success, and if these are mutually exclusive. Are “we each” trying to get (a)head, or are “we” trying to head towards something(s) else?

(In)Conclusion

Performance artists such as myself and my collaborators do not solely work outside, against, and in critical navigation of the literal and conceptual spaces of artworld(ing)s solely because these spaces do not “include” or “recognize” us, rather we re-organize, criticize, theorize, interrogate, mess up, re-structure and escape their extractive and coercive commodification of our individual and social bodies in order to survive on and within our own terms, write up our own social contracts, and trans*form coercive and extractive economic schematics into more open, proliferative, structurally agentic, generative fields of survivable performativity.

In a search for narratives about ourselves, about our tactics, our methods, our messes, our value(s), in attempts to write a respectful self-representation, it is easiest to describe negations and grand embattlements between opposing values and ways of seeing. Both performance art and queerness are often defined by what they are not; not theater, not normative, not dance, non-binary, not stand-up comedy, not drag...and it is easiest to describe performance art simply as that which opposes commodification of persons, bodies, life formations, artworkings, and movements. Beyond resistances and negations however, terms of engagement involving *both*, *and*, *neither*, also come into play through convoluted syntax and attempts to respect differences and contradictions. Complexity, nuance, ideological debate, wordplay, and mixed metaphors may often seem like misunderstandings, confusions, insensibilities, and illegibilities but may also themselves (as intentional artistic practices) become non-compulsory (“artistic” as well as “performative”) mixtures of cultural, economic, theoretical, and political navigations.

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