Heart in Hand

Nicolás Dumit Estévez Raful

I am willing to commit two academic transgressions at once (if not more): to write from the heart and with the heart, and to do so in first person. My announcement might be interpreted as a Chronicle of a Death Foretold, or as a pitiful disclaimer that is meant to help me gain sympathy from you as a reader. Or like an invitation for an audience to congregate to watch a hold up at a given time and location, with an injunction to witnesses to call the cops, and then run home to watch the news on a plasma TV. But my intention is none other than to brace myself on the antique red chair where I sit to write this piece and let the heart, the seat of love, empathy, hate, compassion, and anger, among other emotions, guide me. In preparation for my take off and also during what I call writing as performance, I will break for simple movements reminiscent of Anna Halprin’s dance and healing workshops. These proprioceptic exercises are intended to help me awaken myocardial-hand coordination. I therefore will pause typing this piece for a few minutes to move around my porch in the Bronx with my eyes closed and be guided by the impetus of the life and art practices of those who are part of As Far as the Heart Can See. This is when kinesthetic awareness and, after this, velocity will come into play, and I will take both of them to heart.

Connect with your breath, look away from the screen or sheet of paper where you are reading these words, and locate your heart within the rest of your body without resorting to touch. Your hands can rest on your lap or hang loose from your sides. Unlike me, avoid moving until after you experience several heartbeats in silence.

As Far as the Heart Can See focuses on creative efforts that, however connected to recognizable historical artistic lineages — the avant-garde in general, conceptual art, performance art, social practice, or the on-going attempts to meld art and life — have shifted gear, broken away, found a space in the wilderness, or gone completely astray from institutional canons and the search for validation in order to speak truth. Citing a phrase used by Linda Mary Montano, the art in question is that which “…gives one permission to…” In Linda’s words, this is, “Permission to heal/permission to scream/permission to reveal/permission to learn/permission to talk/permission to rest and any other permission as long as it is not harmful to self or others.” This exhibition therefore gives prominence to some of the many bold acts that artists have given

---

1 I am referring to the title of the Gabriel García Márquez novel.

2 During an Anna and Daria Halprin workshop that I attended in the summer of 2018 at Esalen Institute, in Big Sur, California, entitled Empowering Creativity through Movement/Dance and Life/Art Metaphors, Anna explained proprioception, kinesthesia and velocity in relationship to dance and movement. According to her, proprioception has to do with one’s perception of stimuli within one’s body; kinesthesia with an awareness of one’s movements; and velocity with the pace which one moves.

3 I have formatted all of my instructions throughout this essay in italics.

4 Linda Mary Montano, e-mail message to Nicolás, September 10, 2018.
themselves permission to carry out to achieve self and collective transformative states, to rethink disciplines such as ecology, thanatology, gender studies, anthropoplogy and social work, and to propose new fields of knowledge. These postulates beckon to questions dealing with dislodgements from a linear art history, or the recurring theses about art as life or death and the dissolution of art. Anyway, I will let death have the first word and to give birth to some initial responses.

Find your breath and then proceed to listen to the sound of your heart without using any extraneous equipment.

Much like art, the definition of death is one that has not remained static. To this end, the Mayo Clinic Family Handbook talks about how burgeoning technologies are making us reconsider what constitutes the cessation of life, while presenting us with new ethical questions in this respect. “Only a few years ago, anyone who has lost consciousness, was unable to breathe, and had no heartbeat was considered to be dead.”

Three artists who have made death and dying the central quest in their work for As Far as the Heart Can See are Linda Mary Montano, and Praxis (Delia and Brainard Carey). In 2005 Praxis staged Forget Me Not at Performance Space 122 in New York. Their participatory situation had those in attendance go through a variety of experiences including receiving hugs by the couple, who also placed Band-Aids on the participants’ imaginary wounds and then kissed the Band-Aids the way a mother might do. Perhaps Praxis’ caregiving counteracted with love what Eckhard Tolle calls the pain-body; the body in us that feeds on pain and that seeks unconscious connection for its survival with other pained bodies. Similarly, the spots where the Band-Aids went might point to injuries beyond those to the physical body, but rather the emotional, mental, and spiritual ones. During the live presentation of Forget Me Not at PS 122, the duo invited their guests, one at a time, to enter a coffin that the artists closed with a wooden cover and then carried out in a procession past the remaining audience. The footage that represents Praxis’ work at EFA constitutes a film that was projected during Forget Me Not, and which portrays Brainard’s mother’s struggle with cancer and her imminent death, a story that has been surfacing in my telephone conversations with the couple and that has expanded to reveal additional layers. In the footage one can see Shiva, Praxis’ son, as a young boy, helping hammer nails into his grandmother’s coffin; a drastic departure from how death is treated in the U.S.: as an evil to be stuffed in the back of the closet.

Brainard’s mother’s funeral took place at a Black funeral home in New Haven, Connecticut, during which those present were asked to draw directly onto her coffin. An unusual revelation came out of the funeral and relates to the racial apartheid under which the United States still operates. According to Brainard, the Black funeral director was surprised by their decision to hold the service at his business and mentioned that this was the first time that a funeral for a white person was held there, and when

---


Brainard’s mother was informed as to where her funeral would take place she remarked that, “Martin Luther King said ‘11 o’clock on Sunday morning is the most racially segregated hour in Christian America”.”

Echoing Elisabeth Kübler-Ross’ insights into the state of death in the United States, Ram Dass expresses how, “The more we are helped in this process, the better. Just as we employ midwives to help an infant in its birth, we would be wise as a culture to employ individuals especially trained to help us die. It is tragic, but true, that most people die alone in our culture, in hospital beds in the middle of the night. This is not unlike pushing a boat out to the sea at night without a map or light or compass, and no word of advice for the lone sailor.”

Having read Kübler-Ross as part of his mother’s dying process, Brainard shared with me how, “I told her I wanted her to die during the day, if possible, in front of us, not at night, and she said she would try. And she did; she died during the day with all of us present (Delia and I and our son).”

In their film Forget Me Not, the Careys act as a team of midwife-midhusband-midson, teaching us how to deal with the death of a love one. Praxis was is kindly offering to bring a coffin to the Elizabeth Foundation Project Space where visitors could have engaged with the trappings of death and rehearse their own funeral alone or in the company of others, and document the memento mori with the help of a new technological tool: the cell phone and a selfie. An unrelated ongoing performance at the gallery allows visitors to write a prayer on a piece of paper and put this in a box on the wall. Praxis honors the requests for prayers telepathically from wherever they are. They conclude the process with an e-mail to the petitioners stating that they have indeed prayed for them.

Montano’s NURSE! NURSE!, like Forget me Not, is tied to another personal narrative, as well as to the incursions into art in everyday life. The art of Montano is one that propounds deep shifts at emotional and spiritual levels. The “character” in NURSE! NURSE! is none other than the artist taking part in an experiential performance in front of the camera, practicing how to deal with life in a nursing home, and how to interact with the registered nurse who assist with feeding, wiping, bringing water, and comforting the old. Going to a nursing home holds a somewhat similar level of terror for most U.S. Americans as does the nation’s contemporary avoidance of dying. Both aging and dying are tacitly understood as being in bad taste by the general public. Kübler-Ross states, “I think there are many reasons for this flight away from facing death calmly. One of the most important facts is that dying nowadays is more gruesome in many ways, namely, more lonely, mechanical, and dehumanized; at times it is even

7 “The Most Segregated Hour in America,” last modified October 28, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1q881g1L_d8.

And ongoing telephone conversations with Delia and Brainard Carey, 2017 to present.


9 Brainard and delia Carey, e-mail message to Nicolás, October 28, 2018.
difficult to determine technically when the time of death occurred.” Montano’s embodiment of her own aging in front of the camera takes place in the same chair in which her father had a heart attack, melding art and lived empathy. Even more, this empathy is meant to reverberate in the gallery at EFA as Montano’s video is to be experienced while sitting in a wheelchair and reading her instructions posted on the wall:

LINDA MARY MONTANO:
TO WATCH NURSE! NURSE!
SIT IN WHEELCHAIR
PUT ON EARPHONES
FEEL FREE TO SHOUT OUT LOUD AND
OFTEN, NURSE! NURSE! WHILE WATCHING THIS
VIDEO, NURSE! NURSE!
WHEN FINISHED WATCHING THE VIDEO, TAKE OFF
EARPHONES
STAND UP AND LEAVE THE WHEELCHAIR
GO HOME AND HELP SOMEBODY WHO NEEDS
ASSISTANCE OR A SMILE OR HELP CROSSING A
STREET. DO THAT FOR A MONTH

A second contribution from Montano to the exhibition is her *Interactive Song and Dance for Ana Mendieta*, consisting of a still image and Catholic-like chant referring to the departed Cuban artist, “...Oh, Ana, woman of soil; oh, Ana, oh, Ana, woman of dirt; Oh, Ana, oh, Ana, woman of lying down; oh, Ana, woman of sculpture; oh, Ana, woman of no clothes; oh, Ana, woman of eyes closed; oh, Ana, woman of immigration...” Solemn organ music plays in the background.

But wait! So far in this essay life seems to have smothered art or run amok without supervision. This might be another academic transgression when in fact, I, as a writer needed to remain on target with my initial questions about the death of art and related historical dislodgeaments. So far Praxis’ and Montano’s works are examples of the historic breaks away from art as a linear narrative that progress from chapter to chapter, and which eventually begat performance, video performance, and art in everyday life; but that, like the technical- medical definition of death, does not remain fixed. Where is the boundary that separates art from therapy, caregiving, and social work, and does it really matter?

_Breathe in, expanding your belly naturally, like a baby. Breathe out by pursing your lips as if you were going to whistle. Allow the exhalation to exit your body as slowly as possible, trying to get to a total of four full breaths per minute. During your exhalations, your belly caves in. This is meant to slow down your heartbeat and to induce relaxation._

---


11 Directions for interacting in the gallery with NURSE NURSE! I preserved Montano’s use of caps.
Cardiologist Dr. Herbert Levine “…speculated that perhaps heart rate is a marker of metabolic rate, and a creature’s metabolic rate in turn determines its life span.”\(^{12}\) In other words, the deeper and slower you breathe, the longer you may live.

Writing during the recent great economic recession, Holland Cotter wondered about the beneficial effect of this on art, “…a financial scouring can only be good for American art, which during the present decade has become a diminished thing.”\(^{13}\) Cotter goes on to explain how the diminishing that he discusses has not happened at a quantitative level. The machinery is out of control with more MFA graduates, more curators, and critics and, yes more paintings, sculptures and photographs. Cotter finds a correlation between periods of economic boom and the decline of the art produced, and vice versa. This is key to the works in *As Far as the Heart Can See*; there are two particular points that are of interest to me in Cotter’s piece. One of them is Black Monday in 1987, when the market hit bottom, propelling art made by those kept at bay by the art establishment to achieve prominence: Latinx, Blacks, Asians, lesbians, gays, and feminists. The other point is that of the role of art schools, “Why not make studio training an interdisciplinary experience, crossing over into sociology, anthropology, psychology, philosophy, poetry and theology?...Why not build into your graduate program a work-study semester that takes students out of the art world entirely and places them in hospitals, schools and prisons, sometimes in-extremis environments, i.e. real life? My guess is that if you did, American art would look very different than it does today.”\(^{14}\) I ponder the implications of Cotter’s piece from 2009 today in 2018, now when the U.S. economy is supposed to be at an all time high and unemployment is at its lowest. And I do see the correspondence that Cotter talks about, yet I am also witnessing an answer to his questions in Ivan Monforte’s *There But For the Grace Of God Go I*. Monforte is an MFA graduate from NYU and works as a full time Coordinator of HIV services at a clinic in SOHO. As such his job is to provide sexual health education with a focus on HIV and STD prevention, testing, and treatment to young people 13-24. Ivan’s clients are young Black and Latino guys. Ivan tells me how, “It's really an amazing job but has its hard days. Yesterday we told a 17 year-old young man that his HIV test came back positive. The first thing he asked was is if he could still dance (he’s a dancer) and if he could still kiss. There’s so much work we still have to do.”\(^{15}\)

*There But For the Grace Of God Go I*, is a social sculpture through which the artist invites the public to participate in free and confidential HIV testing administered by Gay Men’s Health Crisis. There are many layers to peel back in this work and in what Monforte does and how he goes about doing it. He has expressed to me his intention not


\(^{14}\) Ibid.

\(^{15}\) Ivan Monforte, e-mail message to Nicolás, September 11, 2018.
to hold an art-related job, but to have a job that he is committed to and that can, in turn, support his art practice, so the art he makes does not get determined by the market-curators-art world. But back to the melding of life and art, as well as to one of Cotter’s ideas, to pull artists out of the art world and connect with life at large, which is by the way, what got Montano’s tenure declined at the University of Texas during the Reagan administration. Montano was sending her middle and upper class white students to spend time at funeral homes, nursing homes, and morgues, among other places. Monforte’s own iterations of Montano’s and Cotter’s vision got him in trouble also when he was performing There But For The Grace Of God Go I for the first time at Longwood Art Gallery/Bronx Council on the Arts, supported by visionary curator Edwin Ramoran. A security guard caught sight of the sign announcing his piece posted on the kitchen door of the gallery and immediately deemed the performance a public health hazard, although there were no needles or blood involved, but oral swabs. Hostos Community College shut down the piece. Is this what happens when art gets too close to life and death, or when artists put the paint down and leave the canvas and the art studio behind to deal with life’s most pressing issues? Of course I am using painting here metaphorically, and as the quintessential medium symbolizing art. Thinking of Montano’s and Monforte’s incursions into life, their emphasis on caring for others, and the safety of those they engage through their art practices, I find it pertinent to close this paragraph with a line from the first safe-sex poster published in 1983. “* Affection is Our Best Protection. *16

The owl butterfly, which in Quechua, the language of some South American Andes Highland peoples, is called Taparaco, and is a recurrent subject in Beatrice Glow’s Taparaco Myth, which I would call a performative journey. The route involving the artist as protagonist, entails traveling from the United States, where she resides, to Peru and to adjacent territories to search for “el chino.” In Peru’s popular mythology, the Taparaco is perceived as a messenger of death, who visits people to share news about a departed relative far away. “El chino,” on the other hand, exists, not just in the Peruvian imaginary as that which can be linked with the Orient [sic], extending from “a people” to all of its cultural manifestations. The same stereotype applies to the rest of Latin America, as far as I know, where anyone or anything Asian is homogenized under the Chinese umbrella. The term becomes an adjective to name the most disparate concepts: rojo chino (Chinese red), pelo chino (actually curly hair in México), and enchinado (in Costa Rica, a child that is spoiled). The implication here is that the child was spoiled by her/his Chinese immigrant nanny). In the Dominican Republic and in Cuba, when a person is seriously ill, people say that No lo salvan ni los médicos chinos (not even Chinese doctors can save her/him). The stereotype travels in both directions. Here in the United States, Asians have been seen as the model minority, and the most recent debate involves the number of Asians that make up the student population of Ivy League universities and top high schools in relationship to the small number of Latinx and Blacks. Yet, returning to Peru, Alberto Fujimori, the Peruvian-born president of Japanese origin would go as far as to accept complicity in El ritmo del chino (the Rhythm of the Chinese). Fujimori appears dancing and campaigning to a song in Spanish urging people to vote for him: El ritmo del chino es el de Perú 2000 (The Rhythm of the Chinese man is that of the Peru of 2000).

---

Taparaco Myth, whose installation at EFA comprises a film, a publication compiling Glow’s travels, and artifacts combining facts with personal and collective fictions, asks of the artist to detach from her familiar surroundings to enter unknown territory, broadly speaking. This undertaking cast the artist in the roles of the anthropologist and researcher, and with the task of suggesting a re-writing of the “Chinese” narratives in the Americas. Glow finds a passage in an anthropology book listing the village of El Chino in the Amazonian rainforest in Peru. “As there is no official version of the tale of the first Chinese man who arrived in El Chino, and the only concrete information about any Asian presence in the village of El Chino is that I am the first ‘North American Chinita’ to arrive in this century, therefore the loss and reinvention of collective memory continues on.” I am curious as to the implications of her presence within the groups she came in contact with. No exchange leaves the two who meet the same as they were before. I am equally curious as to how swapping the order of roles may translate in art that, like that of Glow, spills into the circulatory system of life: artist as anthropologist, or artist as archeologist, to name a few, as opposed to those who have wandered from other non-arts related fields into the arts. There is one person in this exhibition whose work might answer this question.

Envision your in breath traveling from your belly into your heart, and the out breath slowly leaving through your back. You can give your in breath and out breath a different color each.

“By my early thirties, mainstream, commercial sex work gradually became less and less interesting to me. The mainstream commercial sex world and I weren’t giving each other what we wanted. I was looking for a change, some kind of new audience, and more creative freedom.” Annie Sprinkle goes on to write a timeline that includes Willem de Ridder, Yoko Ono, Carolee Schneeman, and Barbara T. Smith, among others. The list discloses not only names and the groundbreaking artworks attached to them, but really signals to a timeline of which … Futurism, Dadaism, conceptual art, and Fluxus are some of the connecting dots. More importantly, Sprinkle asks the question, “Yes, artists could explore sex and nudity in the art world, but could a porn star, prostitute, and pinup model explore art in the commercial sex world?” Sprinkle ends up enrolling in Montano’s Summer Saint Art Camp together with Veronica Vera, where she is inducted into arthood in a baptism performed by Montano and involving a blindfold, sunglasses, calling the spirit guides, and very cold Holy Water. Before that, Sprinkle had wrestled with the terms arthole, suggested to her by de Ridder; and lifeist, suggested by Montano. The seismic shift from sex work to performance artist is of vital important to this exhibition. How does the rift that Sprinkle describes register or not in art history, or does it mess up art history’s linearity for positive reasons, sending it in all kinds of directions?

17 Beatrice Glow. Taparaco Myth/Mito Taparaco (Lima, Peru. 2009), 117.

18 Annie Sprinkle, Post-Porn Modernist: My 25 years as a Multimedia Whore (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 1998), 86.

19 Ibid.
A Google search for lifeist yielded somewhat cryptic but yet synchronistic responses to the death of art: “Someone who enjoys life…Someone who shows prejudice against zombies…[and]…One who does not respect the rights of the undead…”\textsuperscript{20} Before moving forward to the collaborative work that Sprinkle and her spouse Beth Stephens do as eceosexuals and sex-ecologists, I decided to consult Montano for her own definition of the term, to which she responded, “LIFEIST=ONE WHO LIVES ARTFULLY AND FEARLESSLY.”\textsuperscript{21}

From 2005-2011, to be specific, Beth Stephens and Annie Sprinkle developed their \textit{Love Art Lab}, a project inspired by Linda Mary Montano’s use of the chakra system in her \textit{Fourteen Years of Living Art}, that later became \textit{Twenty One Years of Living Art}. \textit{The Love Art Lab}, an initiative centered on love and eco-activism has, nonetheless, a life of its own that connects it to the queer and eceosexual movements that have been fueling Stephens’ and Sprinkle’s creative endeavors since 2008.\textsuperscript{22} The couple’s weddings are collective gathering of energies and communal love for which guests are not asked for gifts, but to come together as a group to celebrate new ways of engaging with the Earth, the living creature that hosts us all. A driving force at the core of these artistic acts is cooperation, a counteractive phenomenon in an art world driven by competition and which follows a pyramidal model with a very few winners at the top, and the rest of the creative underclass at the lower stratum. The eceosexual weddings that Stephens and Sprinkle organize are horizontal in nature and in Nature. I had the opportunity to participate in one of them at a wedding resort in Kelvedon, in the U.K., where the couple hosted the First International Eceosexual Symposium, and where we students, experimented with tree-somes, eco-masochism, and energy orgasms. I recall a perplexed Spanish employee at the resort narrating to one of the students who was part of the class how, during one of the nights, he heard a group of people howling in the dark. It was our eceosexual group interacting with the stars, the moon, and passing clouds in a dark Essex night. But how do you explain this? “We are not part of nature, we are nature,” I heard Anna Halprin say at one of my lessons with her.”\textsuperscript{23} I left Stephens’ and Sprinkle’s workshop as a professed eceosexual; eceosexual ID in pocket.

It is certainly worthwhile noting that Stephens’ and Sprinkle’s weddings acknowledge art history, while at the same time disrupt it. I will explain myself. Each of their celebrations include one or several key art figures whose lineage can be traced to a specific artistic movement or development: Geoffrey Hendricks, Reverend Billy, Linda Mary Montano, and Guillermo Gómez Peña. The artists also clearly acknowledge artistic approaches and disciplines that are now familiar: earth art, performance art, food art, 


\textsuperscript{21} Linda Mary Montano, e-mail message to Nicolás, September 11, 2018.

\textsuperscript{22} During a cell phone conversation with Montano in 2017, she mentioned how \textit{Twenty One Years of Living Art} functions as a no-residency as well as a university, through which she mentors other artists on the art-life chakra system.

\textsuperscript{23} Anna Halprin made this remark during the class with her and her daughter Daria Halprin workshop that I attended in the summer of 2018. See footnote 2 above.
body art, camp, artivism, art in everyday life, lecture performance, mail art, and conceptual art. The list goes on. Yet their heterotopian, ecossexual weddings propose art making as a messy-earthly-muddy-watery-mossy-sensual melding of all of the above that render art history null to a joyful commune-like chaos. This healing disarming of art history is part of the audacious work done by Anna Halprin in the sixties and on, with which she was breaking from the grip of modernism in dance. Likewise, the ecossexual weddings are a post-millennial event reminiscent of Halprin’s Earthy matters in the arts, amongst which I can cite her signature ritual Planetary Dance. Addressing the truncated relationship between “humans” and nature, Halprin says, “Insulated from nature by a special world of mechanical, technological construction, Western culture has deeply disrupted the delicate fabric of life to the extent that we now face serious threat to our continued existence.”

This healing disarming of art history is part of the audacious work done by Anna Halprin in the sixties and on, with which she was breaking from the grip of modernism in dance. Likewise, the ecossexual weddings are a post-millennial event reminiscent of Halprin’s Earthy matters in the arts, amongst which I can cite her signature ritual Planetary Dance. Addressing the truncated relationship between “humans” and nature, Halprin says, “Insulated from nature by a special world of mechanical, technological construction, Western culture has deeply disrupted the delicate fabric of life to the extent that we now face serious threat to our continued existence.”

Add to this the for-profit dismantling of environmental protections by the Trump regime. “Can ecossexuality save the world?” Beth asked me during a video interview at the screening of Water Makes Us Wet at the Judson Memorial Church in New York.

“The skin, like a cloak, covers us all over, the oldest and most sensitive of our organs, our first medium of communication, and our most efficient protector.” The symbolic canvas of which I spoke before when talking about painting, appears in Nao Bustamante’s work unsuspectingly. What about the paintbrush? In Given Over to Want, the artist’s skin claims centrality, becoming the medium on which most of the action takes place, except for the bed sheets that she pierces with lit cigarettes. Red wine and yes the burns made by the dying butts assist Bustamante with the act of painting. I am first tempted to say painting here is not done for traditional pictorial reasons, yet there is a preoccupation with beauty in Bustamante’s process, albeit grotesque. “Please provide cotton-type clothesline rope, two cigarettes and a lighter and a large kitchen knife. I’ll provide the sheet and other props used in the performance: wine, packing tape, oranges, wigs, girdle, and plastic flowers.”

Bustamante, it seems, treats artistic creation as a haphazard event. However, the red wine that spills from the crown of her head, and which is attached to it by duct tape, the same material that Bustamante also uses to fasten the bed sheet onto her body, drenches equally skin-and-cloth as one. Two oranges that Bustamante tapes to her heels burst as she attempts to walk around the room. A performative Big Bang completed, or just merely initiated expands into the space in the form of a citrus aroma. The sheet remains as the main evidence of the scene, a veronica. In Bustamante’s words, “…[This]… performance deals with the themes of transformation and desire. The image

---


25 Pleasure Activist Sunday, was a fundraiser to support the Judson Memorial Church. Hosted by Elizabeth Stephens & Annie Sprinkle, Veronica Vera, Linda Mary Montano, Barbara Carrellas, Veronica Heart, and Betty Dodson. August 12, 2018.


27 Technical needs sent by Nao Bustamante to EFA team organizing As Far as the Heart Can See.
is as primordial as it is hungry and holy, both fully human and fully alien.” 28 I am intrigued by the chasm that this opens up in terms of art making being a recurrent want that can only be satisfied temporarily, much like eating. No matter how hearty the meal might be, it will not bring permanent satiety. Art dies with the hope of reincarnating iterations of the performance. A new white sheet awaits its rebirth and doubles as a shroud for its imminent death, until its birth again, and again, and again. “Mop and bucket handy to clean up wine spillage, which is equivalent to about a glass of wine and some wine residue. I pick up most of the wine with the sheet as part of the performance.” 29

Billy X. Curmano’s, use of skin and touch in his work provides a breather to my understanding of the digital screen being the new skin in a technology-addicted world. The screen, unlike the skin does not transpire; does not exude warmth, but a certain coolness; it does not expand like our porous cloak; it remains contracted except for the endless virtual labyrinth to which it can lead one. Skin and touch in Curmano’s work come about through the props that he builds out of wood, paper, metal, cloth. It comes about as well in what Irina Danilova, another of the artists in As Far as the Heart Can See, talks about as extreme endurances. They outdo endurances in the art world, but do so with great modesty. I call them humbling extreme endurances because I am not sure they seek to impress an audience, but to experience self-transformation; a common theme amongst the artists in the exhibition. There is Curmano’s 40 Day Death Valley Desert Fast, and his Performance for the Dead, which entailed a three day burial underground. In these two examples the artist’s skin is the active canvas for purgation, and the shedding of excess in form of pounds and grams. It also becomes a silent conversation piece with the earth and the whole community of underground creatures that interact with Billy and with which he interacts during Performance for the Dead. Essential too is the sense of touch in one’s interactions with Curmano’s artifacts that are part of Swimmin’ the River. The artist built a box containing an array of stuff found during his swim of the length of the Mississippi River, from sticks chewed by beavers to a can of soda and to a Voodoo (sic) doll. Yes, people can slip their hands through a pair of gloves built into the box and touch the objects.

Find your breath. Place your dominant hand on your heart and catch some of its beats into your palm. “Despite marked differences in body size and heat rate, the number of heartbeats in the lifetime of all species is relatively constant, about 700 million beats.” 30

Carpenter, musician, writer, fan club director, performance artist, swimmer, spiritual seeker, war vet, friend, and painter. I am sure that I am missing many more of the roles I see Billy embody, but I am listing the ones I recall to illustrate the complexity involved in art making and being an artist for Curmano and possibly for his audiences.

---

28 Excerpt from Nao Bustamante’s proposal for Given Over to Want.

29 Technical needs sent by Nao Bustamante to EFA team organizing As Far as the Heart Can See.

and fans. In the list above I forgot to include Curmano’s claim to being Futurism’s bastard son. Whether Curmano sees it as an ironic utterance or a tongue-in-cheek joke, I see the value of this title in his off track creative trajectory. In the past I have called his work outlandish, although I have to admit that his performances are pretty much of this world. They are to be lived in flesh. They interact with what arises moment by moment from critters underground while buried, to the demands of an empty stomach on day 23 of a desert fast. “But is it Art?” From 1987-1997, the artist embarked on Swimmin’ the River, the piece that represents him in the exhibition at EFA. This is a heartfelt project of epic proportions. With this act, he aims at bringing environmental concerns to the surface, and at potentially melding art with life. In one note that Curmano sends to the St. Paul, Minnesota, U.S. Army Engineer District he proposes “…a series of waterslides be added…[to the Mississippi River]… perhaps on the spillway side, to ease self-propelled transportation. I…[volunteers Curmano]…would consider offering my expertise in this matter to assure proper placement…” After reading Curmano’s letters about his project to the U.S. Army Engineer as well as to the English Crown, I answer the question of whether or not all of this is art, but whether it really matters if it is or not.

While pondering on this proposition, use your index finger to point to yourself. Pay attention to the area of the body that your finger is signaling. Which organ is closest to the tip of your finger? Breathe in and breathe out. Allow any sensations in this organ to come up. Give one minute or two to any emotions felt in this specific organ to emerge. Spend time with this/these emotion/s avoiding pushing it/them to the background. When ready, let go. Continue to breathe deeply and slowly.

Ukranian-Born Irina Danilova moved to New York in 1994. While looking for inspiration for art in her new home, she reversed the last two numbers of her first full year in the U.S., and 95 then became 59, and 59 became Project 59. For As Far as the Heart Can See, Danilova acceded to my invitation to delve into her vast archives and exhibit 59 pieces related to some of her private performances, public actions, and encounters with the world at large. A careful look at Danilova’s inventory reveals the variegated nature of her collection, from a crocheted heart made by her sister as a gift to the artist and boasting the number 59 on its front, to a Rosary with none other than 59 beads, and to some of the artist’s bold acts, such as video footage of her diving 59 feet into a body of water. A centerpiece of Danilova’s installation at the gallery is a yards-long philodendron shaped as a wall-sized 59. I want to emphasize this element because it takes me back to the subject of death as it pertains to art and life. In previous writings and in my creative work I posit that art cannot exist outside life for very obvious reasons. Ultimately, no matter what the arguments are about whether art=life or art ≠ life, life holds the final word, or maybe I should say breath. The philodendron, which Danilova has titled Plant Typography and sculpted as an art piece is currently in poor health, as I

31 A humorous question raised by Curmano in his catalogue. Futurism’s Bastard Son (Vienna, Austria: Mark Pezinger Verlag, 2012), 20-21.

32 A humorous question raised by Curmano in his catalogue Futurism’s Bastard Son (Vienna, Austria: Mark Pezinger Verlag, 2012), 20-21.
write this piece, and its leaves are wilting and yellowing. The artist is offering this being life support in the form of plant food. I have offered to give the sculpture-plant hands-on-healing. The EFA Project Space Program Director, Dylan Gauthier, has suggested a special growth light to kindle revitalization. Are we talking here about the death of an art piece or the death of a living being? Are both of these connected in such a way that the possible death of one implies the imminent end of the other? Can the artwork overcome the death of the plant in any form other than documentation, which in performance art usually works as a fetish? In past writings about performance art documentation, I have stated how ostensibly dormant fetishes of performative actions, be they texts, instructions, or guidelines, can be potentially awakened and re-activated by those who come in contact with them. Note that I am not using the term re-performing because of the highly theatrical implications of executing one’s or someone else’s past performance almost faithfully. The re-activation or awakening of performance documentation of which I am speaking, and which can happen in one’s mind and heart, allows for a degree of openness that re-performing, in my opinion, stifles. The awakening and re-activating confers the one willing to engage with the object of performance the ability to raise a Lazarus from the tomb of the archives.

I am particularly drawn to how Danilova moves back and forth with her actions between life and art with the dexterity of a trickster, and in the process leaves me wondering in the middle: in the = or the ≠. There is for example her collection of one-dollar bills that she has pulled out of circulation because they have a 59 somewhere in the serial number. Similarly, there are the three dollars that the artist found in her mother’s pocket when she died: one has a 59 at the beginning of the serial number, the other one has a 59 in the middle, and the last one has a 59 at the end. Life’s beginning, middle and fin. Danilova has also been offering two dollars for any one-dollar bill that one can find with a 59 in its serial number. The artist does not take anything for granted when it comes to 59s, and at the same time she always does. In my interactions with Project 59 I have noticed the brain rewiring effect that engaging with this work has been having on me and possibly on others. Several days ago, I spotted in Garrison, New York, a New Jersey license plate with the 59 in it that I would have simply dismissed before I heard of Project 59. However, there is more to talk about here.

Danilova’s creative use of currency frolics with the ideas of markets and exchange, and with the transmutation of bills and coins into art pieces. Her conceptual “defacements” consist in pulling money out of circulation and turning it into an object of contemplation, and yes reflection. The artist has been collecting pennies, 59 of which are installed on a small shelf fastened onto the wall. Looking at the piles of pennies one is pushed to reflect on the brevity of life. The piles look strikingly puny: a reality check.

Focus on your breath. Locate your heart once more. Let any situation or person for whom you are grieving now or have exiled grieving emerge. Concentrate on just one subject, and instead of detaching from it, come close to it gradually. Pain, anger, fear...may show their face. Look at them while breathing deeply and calmly. Physical discomfort may manifest: a tight heart, a lump in the throat, butterflies in the stomach...Breathe with them. Acknowledge all surfacing sensations and emotions uncritically. When ready let them go slowly. You can always revisit them and continue to
In a conversation on art and life, I would like to push to the forefront one overlooked performative action that has been taking place since the '70s; Martha Wilson’s presence in the New York City arts realm. At first my statement might sound confusing and completely wrong, given the fact that Wilson has been a bastion of the arts for decades and one of the most recognized figures in performance art, not to mention conceptual, book arts, and feminism. What I am referring to here is the persona that has been giving hundreds of artists “permission to…” and who makes itself visible at openings, symposiums, talks, screenings…the list is quite extensive. In the meantime, the focus has fallen on her impersonations of political figures, which I will write about, and on her work as a founder of Franklin Furnace Archive, an organization that has an unparalleled trajectory of funding artwork that might not be popular because of content matter or due to the political climate, to name a few reasons. It is within this gap between her “performances” and performance of the everyday where Wilson complicates the art-life binary for good reasons. Where one side of the equation ostensibly ends the other begins. So, ending and beginning turns into a task as complicated as finding the exact point where exhalation and inhalation actually overlap (if they do). On her way to a talk that I organized in 2017 at the Center for Book Arts as part of the exhibition that I curated entitled *Enacting the Text: Performing with Words*, Wilson traveled through the troubled New York City subway system dressed as the wannabe king Donald Trump, which in Wilson’s piece is THUMP! I experienced how skillfully Wilson was able to slip in and out of character to answer questions coming from the audience, while managing to retain her integrity as a performer and the life of her character. All of this became further manifested at the Elizabeth Foundation Project Space exhibition, with Wilson’s *Political Evolution*, consisting of photographic impersonations of Nancy Reagan, Barbara Bush, William Jefferson Clinton, Tipper Gore, Donald Trump, and Michelle Obama The debate that Wilson’s *Martha Meets Michelle Half Way* incited amongst the exhibition team revolved around what we read as a deployment of blackface by a white artist, and our team reached the consensus that this was unacceptable. This is when the discussion about Wilson’s piece started and continued with her through e-mail and over the telephone. Wilson was very clear that the piece had to show in its entirety: all six portraits, and that the public conversation and reactions that could emerge were not to be dismissed for the sake of political safety. This seemed to be the right decision, and I am personally grateful for Wilson’s determination not to bury this conversation.

In a Q&A for the *Brooklyn Rail* between Wilson and Jarrert Earnest, the artist offers a window into the making of her impersonation of Michelle Obama, “Rail: It’s interesting to see how it will work for you to play Michelle Obama because in an earlier interview someone asked if “you are going to be Michelle now” and you avoided it by saying, “oh no, she’s too hot”—so it’s not just about race but also about age and body-type, which is very complex. How are you going to deal with that?
Wilson: I’ll wear a girdle—that’s for damn sure! And I’m hiring a make-up artist who is going to make me up. Clifford and I had discussions about blackface. We’re not going to do blackface, but I’m going to try to wear Michelle’s skin tone. I have a wig and maybe I’ll wear false eyelashes—I’m going to really try to look like Michelle—but she’s got those guns!”

The son of a black Dominican father with ancestral connections to Haiti, and a Dominican mother of Lebanese and white European background, I grew up in a society that valued and still values whiteness. I was raised in the Caribbean to think of myself as being white, and it was not until I emigrated to New York that I was pushed to confront the fallacies of this flawed narrative. The chamomile shampoo that my mother used to lighten my hair, i.e. to make me blond, would not do in the U.S. As I have been undertaking an inventory of my genealogy and have also embarked on a process of self-decolonization, I ponder over Martha’s portrait of Michelle Obama. Martha says, “The question that remains for me (after employing satire for 30 years) is how does one exhibit admiration? I was attempting to say I am not half as cool as Michelle in the Martha Meets Michelle Halfway work. In Political Evolution I was showing, without text, all the political characters I have embodied; so the intention of each individual work is harder to read. I accept the criticism I got!”

I go back and forth between the impersonation of the Other by the historically privileged, and the failed attempts by the Other to enter the realm of the one in power. There are the plastic surgeries members of my family have pursuit to “correct” their noses, or the travails that some of them have gone through to lighten their skin. I recall reading Malcolm X.’s retelling in his autobiography of his use of lye to make his hair straight, and realizing the meaning of his action, when he noticed that the pipes in the sink were frozen and that “To keep the lye from burning up my scalp, I had to stick my head into the stool and flush and flush to rinse out the stuff.” I am left wandering between Martha Wilson’s homage to Michelle Obama as Wilson articulates it, and Michelle Obama’s use of hair straightener in her role as a public figure with the power to propel shifts in how many of us reclaim our historically colonized bodies. To the left of Wilson’s photographs, on a separate wall, there are almost 60 proposals and 15 videos of the work that Franklin Furnace has helped artists to realize, including mine. These speak of gender, class, race, and politics. I stood in between Wilson’s portraits and the proposals of her organizations’ grantees, silently deliberating on “permission to…”

Pause to connect with your breath. Call your name out loud. Pay attention to how the sound resonates in your heart and the vibrations it produces in this organ.

---


34 Martha Wilson, e-mail message to Nicolás, October 26, 2018.

According to Thomas McEvilley in *The Triumph of Anti-Art: Conceptual and Performance Art in the Formation of Post Modernism*, “Certain ancient Greeks insisted that philosophy should be an activity coextensive with life. Certain artists in our time have said the same about art. ‘Philosophize more often than you breathe’ was the advice of one of the ancient exponents of this view. What he meant is that life lived with a certain focus is philosophy, as in our time it has been claimed that life lived with a certain focus is art.”

Further in his book McEvilley discusses the use of the prefix anti, as in “anti-Pope” and “anti-Christ,” and of course anti-art, and in the process explains the changes that began at the inception of the nineteenth century when art, and no longer religion, became “…the primary channel to the beyond.” While I will agree that this is partly true and that this assertion applies to a certain group of people and not to society at large, what I find of interest in McEvilley’s writing for the purposes of this essay is his argument about how between the beginning of nineteenth century and the climax of World War II, the prefix anti went from implying opposition to serving as a replacement to..., but after World War II McEvilley tells us how anti represented a linearity that included a beginning, middle and end. In the art milieu of the twentieth century the prefix was used as being both “opposed to” and also “instead of.” What was at stake here, according to the author was not something happening in antagonism to, but something that operates as a counter force to the status quo and that which has been institutionalized. In sum, McEvilley’s thesis continues with Marcel Duchamp to go back then to Pyrrhon of Elis, the ancient painter turned philosopher. Pyrrhon of Elis’ teachings favor indifference, “…establishing a position that is neither affirmation nor negation but a kind of attention that attempts to remain neutral and impartial while still alert and vivid.”

This echoes Duchamp and the indifference with which he supposedly conceived the readymade. I find this a compelling debate, especially in light of what McEvilley propounds as Pyrrhon’s refutation of Aristotelian logic and “The Law of the Excluded Middle…[where]…there is no middle position between A and not-A, true and not-true and so on.” I find this equally compelling in a conversation about art=life and art ≠ life, and all of the antis and equals that hover over it. And I find this further compelling in regards to the artists in *As Far as the Heart Can See*: a Wilson who seems to walk in and out of her impersonations and picture frames seamlessly; a Montano who has declared her aging body to be a living sculpture being chiseled by time; a Curmano who was not considered for an art grant because of the possibilities of dying during his art-life piece; a Danilova who has gained entry into a new dimension of life and living by way of a numeral and its seemingly endless possibilities, a Monforte whose social sculpture make one confront life’s mortality on the spot; a Bustamante who makes one reconsider the ethics, concept and aesthetics of living art; a Praxis (Delia and Brainard Carey) who

---


37 Ibid.15.

38 Ibid.21.

39 Ibid.
midwives-husbands us through art, life, death; a Glow whose inward outward journey signals to the act of breathing as connector of body, cosmos, individual, and society; and to a Stephen and Sprinkle who are “…marrying the Earth until death brings us closer together forever.” Thinking of Montano’s question, “What happens when life is enough?” I may, or maybe not, contradict Duchamp’s detachment by answering that: One would have by then achieved a state of creative consciousness that would allow art to finally RIP.

*Dress in pink, red, fuchsia, burgundy…or any other color associated with love and the heart and visit the Elizabeth Foundation Project Space during the run of As Far as the Heart Can See or during any of the upcoming exhibitions at the space. If you end up visiting the gallery after As Far as the Heart Can See concludes, ask for Dylan or Meghana and mention to them casually that you are performing a prompt from this essay. Please give them my regards.*

The Bronx, early fall of 2018


Thank you JP-Anne Giera for all of your hard work and your help with this exhibition.

*Heart in Hand © 2018 Nicolás Dumit Estévez Rafal*

---

40 Beth Stephen and Annie, e-mail message to Nicolás, October 25, 2018.
Works consulted:


