

The Body as Medium: Gender-nonconforming in Contemporary Performance Art

ABSTRACT

Looking closely at gender normativity, this paper is an inquiry into how it is challenged by contemporary artists who use their bodies as the artistic medium and identify as gender-nonconforming. In a contemporary culture where sex and gender continue to be intertwined and binary, the gender-nonconforming performance artist turns those binaries inside out. Using texts from Irigaray, Butler, and Bishop as theoretical base points and examining the artwork of two performance artists, Tara Mateik and nyx zierhut, my own queries from research are then directly compared with personal interviews from both the artists on identity and the body as the center for performance. Furthermore, as a queer femme-identified cis-gendered white female and ally, I propose that my own body is a point of reference as well as any viewer's body. In order to suggest that when one studies artwork, personal physicality and self-identity influence how artwork is originally read, understood, in addition to being challenged by the artwork in regard to the experience and meaning of embodiedness.

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In 1977, Luce Irigaray published her book, *The Sex Which Is Not One*, also the title of the second essay in the text that caused quite a controversy. Irigaray argued that female sex/genitalia had thus far been understood as a receptacle for the male sex/genitalia; her essay was both a summary of years of Western oppression on the female body, specifically ‘her’ genitalia, and a statement that the female body/genitalia has a wholeness which had yet to be culturally accepted or understood.

“For woman is traditionally a use-value for man, an exchange value among men; in other words, a commodity. As such, remains the guardian of material substance, whose price will be established, in terms of the standard of their and of their need! desire, by "subjects": workers, merchants, consumers. Women are marked phallically by their fathers, husbands, procurers. And this branding determines their value in sexual commerce. Woman is never anything but the locus of a more or less competitive exchange between two men, including the competition for the possession of mother earth... But women do not constitute, strictly speaking, a class, and their dispersion among several classes makes their political struggle complex, their demands sometimes contradictory. There remains, however, the condition of underdevelopment arising from women's submission by and to a culture that oppresses them, uses them, makes of them a medium of exchange, with very little profit to them. Except in the quasi monopolies of masochistic pleasure, the domestic labor force, and reproduction.”¹

Though this text may seem antiquated or, even, not applicable to the main queries of this paper, it is imperative to begin with a nod to the history of claiming the body as unique and whole. The claiming of one’s body, its safety, and representation, specifically, how contemporary gender-nonconforming artists use their bodies as the center of artistic inquiry and expression, is the central focus of this paper.

Contemporary culture typically conflates sex and gender as one and regards male and female as a clear binary. Even in post-modern academia there is debate in regard to sex and

¹ Luce Irigaray, *The Sex Which is Not One* (New York: Cornell, 1985), pp. 31-32, <http://caringlabor.files.wordpress.com/2010/11/irigaray-this-sex-which-is-not-one.pdf>

gender; some argue that they are inseparable, others not. Though presumptions of biological sex or cis-genderedness is a part of how the body is interpreted, it is more pertinent for this inquiry to examine gender as an important and valid personal construction, separate from sexual binary and/or sexual multiplicity. Gender, too, has a myriad of interpretations. There is the proverbial umbrella of gender-nonconforming, any body that is outside of that binary--a body that does not fit gender normativity of male and female.

Contemporary gender-nonconforming artists use their bodies as their artistic medium in order to dismantle normativity and prejudice--to turn those aforementioned binaries inside out. One must argue that gender, and specifically, the gender-nonconforming body as used in performance, proffers multifaceted engagement. In turn, there is voluntary/involuntary dialogue about the gendered body elicited by the voluntary/involuntary exchange between the performing body and the body of the viewer. Prior to continuing this inquiry, I must address that as a queer femme-identified cis-gendered white female and ally, I understand that I am in the position of speaking about someone else's body. A body I do not inhabit. This is a delicate area and must be approached with utmost respect, and the acknowledgement that I can never speak for an other but can only do my best to be continually conscious of what it means to be an ally.

GENDER NORMATIVITY

Judith Butler eloquently states in her 2004 book *Gender Trouble*, about the cultural constructs of gender normativity versus the plurality of gender norms and claiming one's own individual body:

“ To claim that gender is a norm is not quite the same as saying that there are normative views of femininity and masculinity, even though there clearly are such normative views. Gender is not exactly that one “is” nor is it precisely what one “has.” Gender is the apparatus by which the production and normalization of masculine and feminine take

place along with the interstitial forms of hormonal, chromosomal, psychic, and performative that gender assumes. To assume that gender always and exclusively means the matrix of the “masculine” and “feminine” is precisely to miss the critical point that the production of that coherent binary is contingent, that it comes at a cost, and that permutations of gender which do not fit the binary are as much a part of gender as its most normative instance. ... Gender is the mechanism by which notions of masculine and feminine are produced and naturalized, but gender might very well be the apparatus by which such terms are deconstructed and denaturalized.”²

The performance work of two contemporary artists, Tara Mateik and nyx zierhut are fitting examples of this deconstruction and denaturalization. Both Mateik and zierhut are gender-nonconforming artists who use their bodies as a point of reference, action, and presentation. In consideration of the gender-nonconforming body, it is equally important to present the complexity of language for gender identification in correlation with pronoun preference. One cannot speak for an other. From his website, Tara Mateik, “ is an artist and educator living in New York City. In his videos and performances he typecasts himself as theoretical and cultural transvestites from pop music, competitive sport, and weird science.”³ nyx zierhut uses the pronouns ze/hir/hirs and defines hirs as “trans/queer multiracial.”⁴

Their statements are but two examples of language in regard to gender identification and embodiment--he/him and ze/hir/hirs. Language cannot be stripped from inquiry in regard to gender identity, pronouns are part and parcel to claiming of one’s body as much as physicality/appearance. It is not enough to simply discuss their artwork, the position of ally must also be addressed. In its most simple terms, an ally is a person who supports socially and politically persons who are marginalized by class, race, gender, and sexual preference within a global social

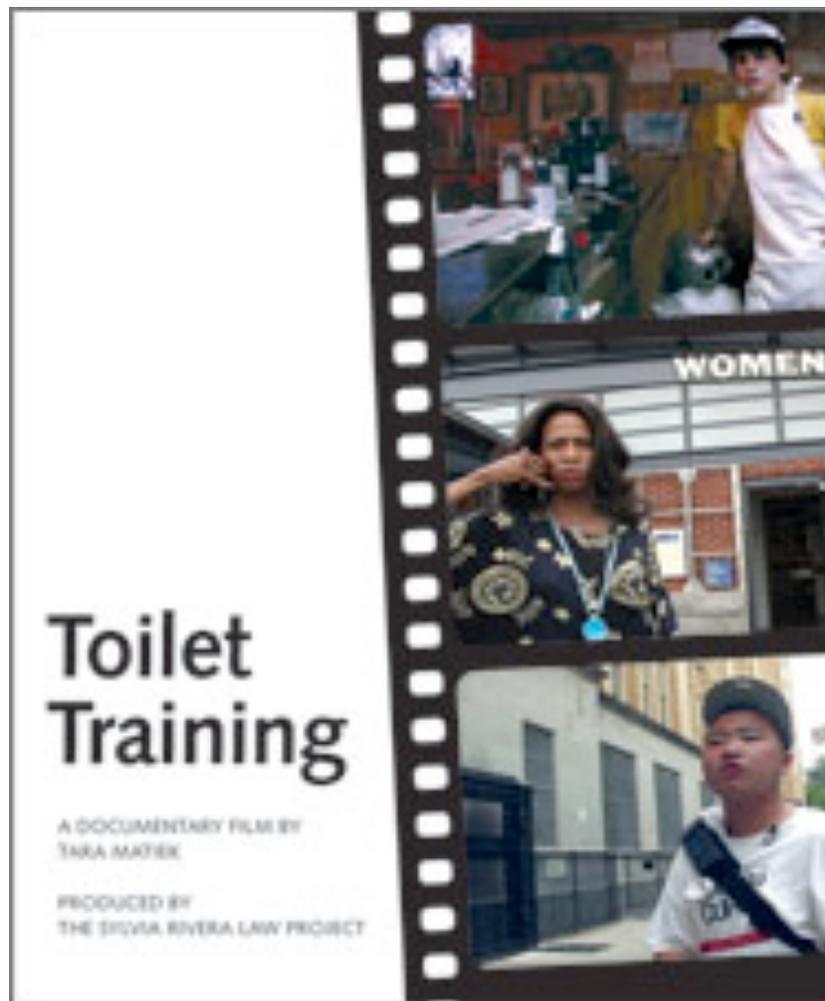
² Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, Chapter 2 Gender Regulations (New York: Routledge, 2004) p 42.

³ Tara Mateik, last modified 2013, <http://www.taramateik.com/about/>

⁴ nyx zierhut, email exchange with the author, October 2013

and political context. By breaking apart cultural constructs of gender binaries with their artwork, it is also valid to recognize that both Mateik and Zierhut are placed in vulnerable positions. As viewers we first understand the performance work of both Mateik and Zierhut from my our own body and experience. This is the imperativeness of what it means to be an ally -- to look closely at our own assumptions, freedoms, and embodiedness. In this trajectory of allied-ness, there is transformative possibility in Mateik and Zierhut's performance work for any viewer to a) become aware of their own body/embodiedness in public/private space and b) through this awareness cultivate an ally position.

THE BODY PUBLIC



Gender-nonconforming artist Tara Mateik's *Toilet Training: Law and Order in the Bathroom* is a documentary video produced by and in collaboration with the non-profit organization the Sylvia Rivera Law Project (SRLP), "an organization dedicated to ending poverty and gender identity discrimination."⁵ On the Mateik's website, he states that his video:

"surveys the policing of gender in restrooms—persistent discrimination, harassment, and violence towards people who do not culturally fit as male or female. What happens when laws are broken and order is disrupted in the bathroom? Through anecdotal case studies, TOILET TRAINING focuses on bathroom access in public space, in schools, and at work and related problems associated with "holding it." Concluding with examples of policy change, TOILET TRAINING provides a necessary foundation to address this overlooked issue."⁶

Completed in 2003, this documentary video uses a just a hint of pop-culture pastiche by beginning with the visual type-face trope from the television show *Law and Order*. The resonating power in this video, still pertinent in 2013, is how the gender-nonconforming body is publicly read; in viewing this video, one questions how the freedom to use the bathroom for which one gender identifies can be an obstacle. Specifically, the cultural bias of 'agreed upon gender representation' for the public bathroom and how many gender-nonconforming persons experience a high level of anxiety due to numerous accounts and occurrences of violence, verbal and/or physical, by persons who carry and act upon their aggressive cultural biases. One must pose the question of freedom in public space. The very nature of being outside gender normativity can place one at risk in public. The bias of those who fit gender normativity, if one can use such a light term as bias, can place the gender-nonconforming person in danger, not only in public space but also in public bathrooms. This freedom is not only a question of safety but also a question of humanness. Judith Butler makes the argument for new understandings of

⁵ Sylvia Rivera Law Project, accessed October 2, 2013, <http://srlp.org/resources/toilettraining/>

⁶ Tara Mateik, last modified 2013, <http://www.taramateik.com/toilet-training/>

humanness in contemporary culture, arguing that if gender normative binaries do not have to question their humanness, those who blur the boundaries of binaries have to involuntarily grapple with where they fit in with humanness, protection, individual freedoms, and laws. Butler continues by stating that “this means that we are constituted politically in part by virtue of the social vulnerability of our bodies; we are constituted as field of desire and physical vulnerability, at once publicly assertive and vulnerable.”⁷ How pertinent the documentary, *Toilet Training: Law and Order in the Bathroom*, aligns with this statement.

This collaborative documentary is not only informative for those who never have to question which bathroom is safe to use, but, moreover, becomes a public voice for those who are gender-nonconforming to express personal accounts of harassment and violence. To reference Butler once more, “How do drag, butch, femme, transgender, transexual persons enter into the political field? They make us not only question what is real, and what “must” be, but they also show us how the norms that govern contemporary notions of reality can be questioned and how new modes of reality can become instituted.”⁸ For Mateik, Butler’s question can be a point of reference for his work, whether he uses the video documentary or performance of his own body, the viewer is confronted with their own concepts of gender, and in turn, their own inquiries into the position of the ally, uncomfortableness, and acceptance rather than tolerance.

⁷ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, Chapter 1 Beside Oneself: On the Limits of Sexual Autonomy, (New York: Routledge, 2004), p 18.

⁸ Ibid, p 29.

PERFORMANCE AS VOLUNTARY/INVOLUNTARY EXCHANGE

As a viewer we voluntarily watch and involuntarily have an exchange with the performer via our spectatorship. This is nothing new. Voluntary and involuntary exchange in performance can be traced historically within all cultures. Nicolas Bourriaud's mid-1990 inquiry into contemporary performance as democratic social exchange between artist/artwork and viewer was termed *relational aesthetic*. It would be incorrect to group Mateik or Zierhut as contemporary performers who use *relational aesthetics*, but it would not be incorrect to acknowledge that their bodies are the center for voluntary/involuntary exchange. Looking at the performance work of nyx Zierhut, who uses her body in its totality, she states "my body is the center of my work, the site/sight/site (location/vision/reference), my physical, visual, auditory, and conceptual material. My work through and with this body in its peculiarities, possibilities, and limitations is itself the center of my creative practice."⁹

Bishop's counter argument to Bourriaud's theories are appropriately applicable. Can this be a democratic exchange when the viewer is placed in the position to question their own embodiedness, "if relational art produces human relations, then the next logical question to ask is what types of relations are being produced, for whom, and why?"¹⁰ Where are we placed in relationship to Zierhut's performance? By presenting Laclau and Mouffe's concept of antagonism as a counter argument for Bourriaud's basic theory of democraticness within *relational aesthetics*, Bishop argues that it is necessary to acknowledge difference between viewer and performer, the tensions that may arise and accepted social boundaries that are pushed -- that performance can

⁹ nyx Zierhut, email exchange with the author, October 2013

¹⁰ Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," October, vol. 100 (Autumn 2004): pp 66-67, url: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3397557>

function in a healthy antagonist way¹¹. Furthermore, and most valid for Zierhut's performance art:

“It is no longer enough to say that activating the viewer tout court is a democratic act, for every art work—even the most “openended”—determines in advance the depth of participation that the viewer may have with it. . . . The tasks facing us today are to analyze how contemporary art addresses the viewer and to assess the quality of the audience relations it produces: the subject position that any work presupposes and the democratic notions it upholds, and how these are manifested in our experience of the work.”¹²

Our experience of the artwork as viewer of the gender-nonconforming body is a topic that cannot be dismissed, no matter if we are in the position of ally, identify with the performer, or even disrupted by our own social gender normative expectations. In Zierhut's 2012 performative installation, *Please Construct a Male body*, for 30 minutes, “audience participants were presented with [hir] body and a variety of other materials, accompanied by a sign reading "please construct a male body" (image 1). participants manipulated the available materials as they chose; in their final actions altering the sign to read "a male body." (image 2.)”¹³

It is imperative to let Zierhut speak for hirself, ze states in regard to this performance that “although I do not identify as male, i wished to give the participants a visceral experience of the ways in which we are complicit in our gendering of others, this performance was a very literal social construction of gender -- whether the resulting gender was embraced by the subject or not.”¹⁴ This performance is a way in which positive antagonism is present, yet also the presentness is reliant on Zierhut's exposure of hir body and directly placing the viewer/

¹¹ Claire Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,” *October*, vol. 100 (Autumn 2004): p 78, url: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3397557>

¹² *Ibid.* p 78

¹³ nyx Zierhut, email exchange with the author, October 2013 / images courtesy of the artist

¹⁴ *Ibid.*



participant in the role of deciding/not deciding a gender. For hir performance, the participants concluded by naming a gender binary 'a male body,' even when presented with zierhut's fully exposed body.

Reading zierhut's body as both a person of color and gender-nonconforming, the viewer is placed in two positions: how zi gender identifies and how zi racially identifies. These identifications are for hir to decide, not the viewer. zierhut's body in performance is multivalent, pending on the audience who can either see themselves, see other, or in the aforementioned performance rely on the comfort of gender normativity. I would argue, though, that the viewer as spectator/participant is placed into their own body and embodiedness--no matter the actions that they take. The result for which I hope is to question genderedness, representation, racial identity and larger cultural biases.



PERFORMANCE AS DEVELOPING UNDERSTANDING AND THE POSITION OF ALLY

The resonating importance of the gender-nonconforming body as used in performance causes consideration of our own bodies and its freedoms, simply because many of us are in the position of other and even if we do identify, we are still reminded that we are other--the body is individual. In what ways are we challenged as witnesses if we are not gender-nonconforming? What thoughts do we have about constructs of gender and the right of personal representations and understanding of gender? One cannot claim to understand the experience of an other's body, socially, politically, or physically, but they can speak as allies. As an ally myself, and in a world

where the body is assigned larger cultural constructs, I think it is imperative that we, in the arts and humanities, begin to pay closer attention to binary gender constructs. What better than to close with a quote by Judith Butler in regard to the question of gender embodiment, and how appropriate to carry this thought as a viewer for gender non-conforming performance artists.

“The point is not to assimilate foreign or unfamiliar notions of gender or humanness into our own as if it is simply a matter of incorporation or alienness into an established lexicon. Cultural translation is also a process of yielding our most fundamental categories, that is, seeing how and why they break up, require resignification when they encounter the limits of an available episteme: what is unknown or not yet known. It is crucial to recognize that the notion of the human will only be built over time in and by the process of cultural translation, where it is not a translation between two languages that stay enclosed, distinct, unified. But rather *translation will compel each language to change in order to apprehend the other* [italics Butler’s], and this apprehension, at the limit of what is familiar, parochial, and already known, will be the occasion for both an ethical and social transformation.”¹⁵

¹⁵ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, Chapter 1: Beside Oneself: On the Limits of Sexual Autonomy, (New York: Routledge, 2004), p 38

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Please Construct a Male body, zierhut, nyx. Installation stills. Courtesy of the artist