

# The Missing Body

*PERFORMANCE IN THE ABSENCE OF THE ARTIST*

**Vito Acconci**  
**Blair Brennan**  
**David Cross**  
**Mandy Espezel**  
**Sam Guerrero**  
**Guerrilla Girls**

**Calder Harben**  
**Rachel Herrick**  
**Michelle Lacombe**  
**Naima Lowe**  
**Cheli Nighttraveller**  
**Mami Takahashi**

curated by **Cindy Baker**





# **The Missing Body**

*Performance in the Absence of the Artist*

*Cindy Baker*

2014  
*Lethbridge, Alberta*

*The Missing Body: Performance in the absence of the artist*

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Front Cover: Mami Takahashi, *Hiding/Observing: Capsule in Bush*  
Back Cover: David Cross, *Bounce*

# Performance in the Absence of the Artist

Cindy Baker

“ I am investigating the possibility that something substantial can be made from the outline left after my body has disappeared. My hunch is that the affective outline of what we’ve lost might bring us closer to the bodies we want still to touch than the restored illustration can. ”

Peggy Phelan, *Mourning Sex*

Accepted (and contested) definitions of performance art agree that, at its most basic, performance art requires the presence of a body in space over time—physical, rather than just conceptual or figurative presence. *The Missing Body* challenges that definition, arguing that it must not be taken for granted that the art of a performance exists in the artist’s body.

The twelve artists in this exhibition use installation, sculptural and photographic work, video, live performances in which the public is invited to participate, and interventions into public space. Their work explores the concept of performance through an investigation of art in which the artist’s body is obscured, hidden, or simply not present in the final manifestation of the presented work.

In this prefatory essay, I discuss four methodologies used by artists who have removed their own bodies from performative work:

- *Engaging or hiring other people to perform.*
- *Encouraging audience transgressions in the presentation space which create, activate, or complete the artwork.*
- *Creating object-based artworks which are stand-ins for their own body.*
- *Hiding their body inside the work.*

## **Engaging or hiring other people to perform.**

Performance artists often engage others to perform in their work; these individuals may be hired, coerced, contracted, or are otherwise obligated through some kind of agreement to participate in a work of art. The defining characteristic of these diverse works is that the artist intends for them to be considered performance works, though the performers may be actors, musicians, painters, construction workers, or anyone else.

## **Encouraging audience transgressions in the presentation space which create, activate, or complete the artwork.**

Transgression is a key element of these works, creating the element of risk that enables the performative moment. In this context, I use the word “transgression” to mean any act, action, or response to an artwork which results in a performance, even as slight as an embodied affect. Intentionality of the artist is important in this methodology; any audience member of any artwork may transgress any number of boundaries within a presentation space, potentially resulting in actions considered performative (by them, the artist, or anyone else); however, I am concerned only with those works where part of the artist’s intention is that the work be transgressed upon. Although artists working with transgression may not explicitly use the word “performance”, artists’ desire and intention for audience activation is a defining characteristic of this performance strategy.

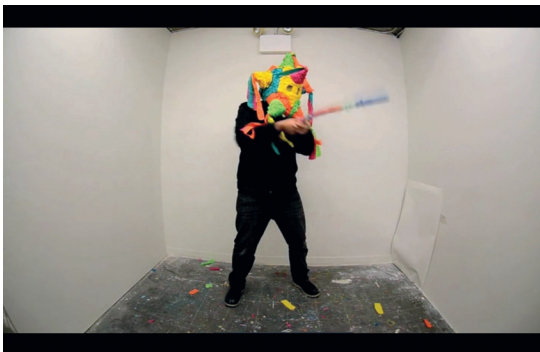
The fact of the audience as performer creates crucial opportunities for connection between artist and audience, audience and artwork, and perhaps most importantly, audience and the concepts and issues foundational to the work. The potential for opening dialogue, for creating moments of empathy, is what make these methodologies particularly relevant.

### **Creating object-based artworks which are stand-ins for their own body.**

These objects may be the result of performative actions (performance ephemera or documents), or works that are meant to allow the artist to be present (“performing”) in the space while providing the relative safety and detachment of physical distance. They may be literal analogues for the artist, as in Rachel Herrick’s “obeasts”—which are exact replicas of her body—or they may be symbolic, as in Michelle Lacombe’s *Portrait of a Salty & Barren Body*. This category of performance is less about inventing new ways to talk about what is essentially sculpture/installation and more about learning, as artists, to conceptualize art in ways which give the audience agency, allowing for their development of new ways of knowing and avenues to deeper connection with the artists, the work, and the ideas within.

### **Hiding their body inside the work.**

There are many different ways for bodies to be hidden within performance. Costumes, obstructive props, and employment of separate performance and viewing spaces are but a few of the ways that artists can be physically present yet also absent from the performance. Artists may even be hidden by virtue of the fact that the audience is unsure of which person in a roomful of people is the artist.



Sam Guerrero, *Still Trying for a Breakthrough* (2012)  
Video still

In *Mourning Sex: Performing Public Memories*, performance theorist Peggy Phelan suggests that in the absence of eye contact, the observed body does not exist; even those artists whose bodies are physically visible, if their vision is obscured, can be considered hidden. In this approach, risk, transgression, and a false illusion of distance are taken on by both artist and audience member, expanding a capacity for intimacy between artist/art and audience that few artworks can. Sam Guerrero harnesses this approach in his piece *Still Trying for a Breakthrough* by encasing his head in a piñata; he resists the controlling power of the gaze, and performs in his own world. Mami Takahashi is farcically visible in her *Hiding/Observing* project, yet she, too, avoids becoming owned by the spectator gaze.

These four methodologies can be effective tactics for opening dialogue about concepts and ideas that are otherwise be difficult to broach, particularly those topics that address corporeality and identity.

Removing the artist's body from the performance creates opportunities for those on the outside of the performance to step inside the work—physically, conceptually, or symbolically. By de-emphasizing their own bodies, performance artists refocus attention away from themselves, privilege others' experiences, dismantle boundaries between performer and audience, and disrupt unequal power dynamics in the presentation space. Artists can use these strategies to, among other things, make work about sociocultural issues and give voice to people within marginalized groups, including those whose race, class, gender, ability, bodies, or sexuality differ from the dominant culture and who are systematically silenced. They can also use these strategies to resist the dominant narrative, resist their own victimization or re-traumatization, or challenge the role of the institution and those within it.

Re-centering where the art resides takes the spotlight off of the object or the body and shines a light on the margins. Denying the artist's centrality as the locus of the performance rejects the rarified position of the artist, hiding one body in order to substitute others' bodies, knowledge and expertise in their place. *The Missing Body* proposes to broaden the ways institutions, artists and audiences think about performance art, fostering opportunities for deeper connections and meaningful dialogue.

# Vito Acconci

New York City, New York, U.S.A.

Vito Acconci, a New York-based contemporary artist best known for his work produced in the 1970s and 1980s, was influential in the American conceptual, video, and performance genres of that time period. Acconci's work since the early 70s has focused on blurring borders between audience and artist, while his performance quickly shifted from a focus on the body to work from which his body was absent. From performance featuring only his voice, to conceptual performance work that was manifested as prints, to work where his body was hidden within the performance space, Acconci's art has been foundational to the concept of performance in the absence of the artist's body. Acconci has exhibited widely around the globe, including solo shows at the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art, the New York Museum of Modern Art, and Cologne's Kolnischer Kunstverein.

## ***Touchstone (for V.L.), Trademarks, & Kiss Off***

Printmaking might be considered the ultimate form of reproduction. It is the laboured and deliberate translation of an image into a format which allows its replication in great number. Vito Acconci was making prints as performance in the early 1970s, using his body variously as press, matrix and substrate; the three pieces included in *The Missing Body* represent not only innovative ways of looking at performance, but of thinking about printmaking as well. Though his body was essential to the production of these works (not just because, as most artists do, he produced them using the labour of his body, but because his body provided the “ink,” the “paper,” and the image of the work), it is absent from the final product—but is it still a form of reproduction?

According to Peggy Phelan, in the case of performance in which the artist's body is hidden, it does resist reproduction. Phelan writes:

“Performance's only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance. To the degree

that performance attempts to enter the economy of reproduction it betrays and lessens the promise of its own ontology. Performance's being, like the ontology of subjectivity proposed here, becomes itself through disappearance.” **Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked***

Performances in which the artist is present but hidden, such as Vito Acconci's *Seedbed* (1972) where the artist is laying hidden under the floor of the gallery, masturbating, happen in the present and then disappear—though they were not visibly present to begin with. They must be imagined as disappearing.

The artist who hides their body within the performance does not have the opportunity to be a witness to the work, but neither does the audience have an opportunity to witness the performance in a traditional way. The desire for mastery over that which is represented, which is created in the viewer through the process of looking, can best be resisted by denying the gaze.

# Blair Brennan

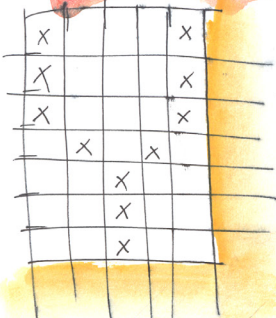
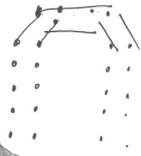
Edmonton, Alberta, Canada

Blair Brennan combines his art practice and writing from his home in Edmonton. His sculpture, installation and drawing have been exhibited nationally in numerous group and solo exhibitions.

Recent group exhibitions include *Text Crutch* (Jackson Power, Edmonton, October- November, 2013) and *Made in Alberta Part IV* (Art Gallery of Calgary, March-May 2013). In May 2012 a collaborative work by Brennan and Edmonton artists Sean Caulfield and Royden Mills was featured in *The Body in Question(s) / Le Corps en Question(s)* at Galerie de l'UQAM (Université du Québec à Montréal). The exhibition was conceived by curator/choreographer Isabelle Van Grimde, as the site of evening dance performances presented in Montreal as part of the FTA (Festival TransAmérique) dance/theatre festival. *The Body in Question(s)* will be presented in Ottawa and Edmonton in summer 2015 with further presentations to be announced. Brennan is currently preparing a survey exhibition for Edmonton's dc3 Art Projects for September 2014.

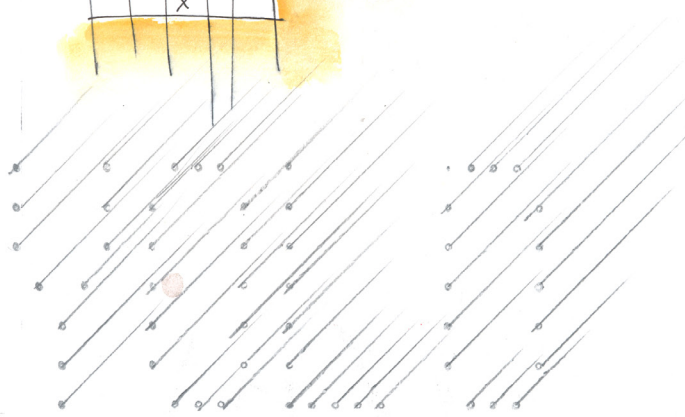
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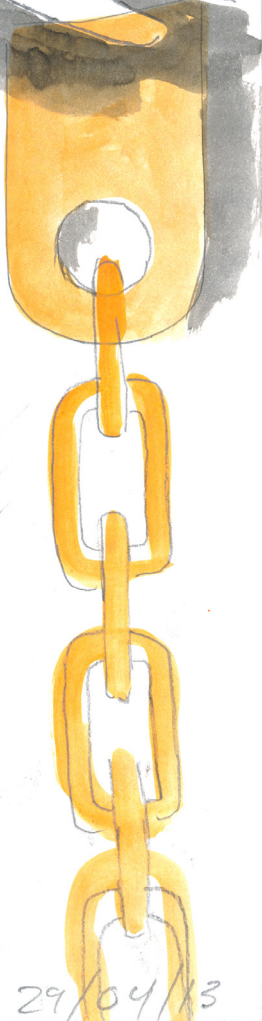
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Brennan has contributed articles to a number of national arts and cultural publications. In December 2012, he completed an appointment as Writer in Residence for Latitude 53 Society of Artists, Edmonton: <blog.latitude53.org/tagged/Blair-Brennan>. He has contributed guest articles to Prairie Seen website: <prairieseen.tumblr.com/blairbrennan> and his catalogue essay on Edmonton artist Catherine Burgess accompanied her recent Art Gallery of Alberta exhibition.

## **Blood + Time**

Brennan's work very often employs the branding iron: on the wall, on rawhide, leather, paper. It evokes the cowboy, the wild west, the manly man, but also pain, sacrifice, the indelible mark. *Blood + Time* represents a slight shift to focus specifically on the marked human. By using the devices of the tattoo artist rather than the cow hand, he references the urban (rather than the rural), the contemporary (rather than the romantic), the aesthetic (rather than the functional). The needle is cleaner, more precise than the brand. It also implies consent in the making of the image—a choice made by the wearer to receive the mark, and the notion that the mark was self-selected. (Brands are, in every sense, the mark of the brander; tattoos are a collaboration meant to represent a symbol of and for the wearer.) There is no ink in this machine, but the process is much the same. The artist is the performer in absentia as the tattoo-er/markmaker, and yet the audience member is the performer; it is they who must choose to mark their flesh, they who must sit down at the machine, and they who must mete out their own pain. This work brings the absent artist and the audience member into extremely close proximity; one quite literally feels the pain of the artist. The mark, YOLO (You Only Live Once), urges the audience to participate, while its cultural connotation simultaneously derides their lack of class. YOLO, the call of the dudebro popularized by hip hop artist Drake, suggests a carpe diem attitude that implies living life to the fullest but which has in fact come to symbolize reckless and irresponsible behaviour characterized by unexamined, macho bravado (such as, say, clamping your arm into a bed of razor-sharp needles?).

In his essay "Making Art Like a Man", David Garneau says:

"The branding iron, with its mark, is Brennan's obsession. It has a flexible power. I see it as a profound symbol for the mark-of-the-father. The long, firm, hot rod with the ability to imprint itself numerous times is a fine phallic and male fertility symbol. It is, he explains, a painful marker of territory and property. It is a sign of masculine patrimony, an inheritance that is a privilege as well as a burden, making much of Brennan's work a sign of pain and the possibility of redemption."

**David Garneau, "Making Art Like a Man"**

The tattoo has less patriarchal, less phallic imagery (though not entirely devoid). It is at least as ritualistic, however, eschewing fire for ink, it is less primitive; there is more of a reference to the pen, the brush, the civilized, the artistic, the intellectual. The rite is performed by the disciplined/proficient on the uninitiated; both, however, consenting to the performance that creates an image on the body of one.

The work also references the bed of nails – in popular western imagery, an unfathomable "Eastern" device, evoking the image of a torturous act performed as proof of one having attained a higher state (achieved, in part, through the practice of enduring the act itself). Used in the Western world in magic tricks or feats of strength, the bed of nails proves not so much torturous as an illusion of physics; the distribution of the user's weight over many nails dissipates the energy such that the nails are not in danger of puncturing the skin, even when cinderblocks are placed on the abdomen of the user and hit with a sledgehammer. *Blood + Time* is not that kind of bed of nails; it doesn't contain that many needles. This device has the potential to draw blood.

The tattoo and the bed of nails call to mind the underground, the ritual, the magic/k, the harnessing of pain as a way of learning to control, and thereby transcend it. Brennan's interest in pain clearly has its roots in an examination of masculinity, but it also has roots in a deep embodied knowledge of pain. The tangible absence of the body in his work can be read as a resistance of, and transcendence of his experience of pain; where there is no (physical) body, there is no (physical) pain. Brennan's work literally calls to perform: YOU ONLY LIVE ONCE! Take a chance! The squirm, the shock are not enough. Brennan asks: what are you waiting for?

left: Blair Brennan, *A Plan To Mark You*, 2013 (29/06/13)  
Ink, watercolour and pencil on preprinted paper, 11" x 8 1/2"  
Preparatory drawing for *Blood + Time*

Through the intrinsic concept of loss, in *Unmarked*, Peggy Phelan explains performance art's "fundamental bond" with ritual, especially in performance that uses physical pain, via its evocation of the (symbolic) death of the performer, which elicits a promise to remember that which is lost. Blair Brennan's work adopts the ritual as both subject and method, and perhaps it is for this reason that there is such an easy affinity between his (sculptural, installation, drawing, print) work and performance. *Blood + Time* asks the audience not to witness the death of the performer, but to become the performer; it asks the audience to become willing to die and so doing be reborn. In being willing to die, the viewer ritually enacts his own death and carries on his arm the symbolic death of the artist. The potential to cause physical pain is not what makes this work powerfully affective, but its potential to reach one's deepest fears of mortality. The artist, the absent executioner, acknowledges that the viewer must face this fear alone. Having faced the fear, however, the audience is bonded to the artist and to others who perform the ritual.

Performance art, Phelan writes, bridges the gap between two realities: the corporeal and the psychic. It is a type of magic that lights up the space between the opposing ideas about what is real, and illuminates the Whole that exists in between but is rarely seen. Brennan's work often references (and, I think the artist would admit, literally conjures) magic: the performance of rituals, the creation and invocation of spells, the treatment of art as holy. In "Three Things I Know About Magic... and Another Thing I Know about Magic", Brennan talks about an interest in syncretism (the integration of one set of beliefs and practices into another) as a way of explaining his incorporation of Christian imagery and magic/k symbols in his work. What is more striking to me is his apparently syncretic combination of the systems of art and magic, and how he harnesses magic to make art which has the power to heal.

In "Some Kind of Beautiful: The Grotesque Body in Contemporary Art", David Cross discusses body art, the performance genre of the 1960s and '70s, as the first art that attempted to reduce the invisible divide between art and audience (thereby destroying the art/life barrier) by creating performances that would not allow the audience to distance themselves from the work or their visceral response to it, forcing them to confront their own limitations. He suggests that contemporary entertainment (e.g. David Blaine, Chris Angel, Fear Factor) has usurped the position of body art. Brennan's *Blood + Time*, referencing the culture of contemporary theatre of shock, does not shrink the divide between art and audience, it removes it completely, providing the audience an opportunity to not just

confront knowledge, but to create it; to be the artist, the performer, and the canvas as well.

Our contemporary culture of the spectacle, of body modification, of the shock factor and one-upmanship may make body art less effective today. But for artists like Brennan whose work references popular culture and the kitsch, and who is not interested in shock, this is an effective medium to use towards slightly less bombastic ends. The work is not shocking, because it does not show the audience blood or gore, nor a screaming artist. It invites the audience to imagine spilling some of their own, and to clean it up responsibly before they go and leave the space as tidy as they found it. In conversations with Brennan, he admitted wanting to evoke an "I-want-to-hurt-you-in-an-abandoned-warehouse" sensibility; however I think the work functions more in an "I-want-to-hurt-myself-in-an-abandoned-warehouse-and-clean-it-up-before-I-leave" way.

## David Cross

Melbourne, Australia

David Cross (b. 1968) works across performance, installation, video and photography. His practice brings together performance art and object-based environments, focusing on relationships between pleasure, the grotesque and phobia. His works often involve inflatable objects and structures that draw audiences into unexpected situations and dialogues as Cross seeks to explore contemporary experiences and understandings of participation in art. Increasingly he has begun to work in the public sphere developing works that navigate the relationship between sport, collective decision making and sensory deprivation.

Cross has exhibited extensively in New Zealand, Australia, Eastern Europe and the United Kingdom. He has performed in international live art festivals in Poland, Croatia, and was selected as a New Zealand representative at the Prague Quadrennial in 2011. Recently Cross has developed a major temporary public commission Level Playing Field for Scape Public Art 7 in Christchurch, New Zealand. Cross also writes on contemporary art and his curatorial projects include the large art in public space projects *One Day Sculpture* across New Zealand, 2008–09 (co-directed with Claire Doherty) and *Iteration: Again* in Tasmania, 2011. He is Professor of Visual Arts at Deakin University.

right: Blair Brennan, *Blood + Time*, 2013 (17/06/13)  
Ink, watercolour and pencil on paper, 11" x 8 1/2"



## Bounce & Pump

In my own visual art practice, I often talk about the taboo body: one which society deems unsuitable. People with taboo bodies are silenced, they do not see their experience reflected in the dominant narrative, and they are given cultural messages that they should not exist. David Cross' work focuses on what he calls the "non-preferred body". Similar to the taboo body, the non-preferred body includes any body which society considers valueless: the revolting, the abject, the grotesque. Rather than describing it as the "abnormal" body, as Foucault did—implying that the nature of the problem exists in and on the body (i.e. not "normal")—Cross uses the word "non-preferred" to remove the focus from the body as the site of the issue and place it on the society which rejects it. Cross borrows this concept from film theorist Kaja Silverman who, in *The Threshold of the Visible World*, suggests a need to stop referring to bodies in terms of a hierarchy of characteristics ("good bodies" and "bad bodies"), and refer to bodies in terms of a matter of choice ("bodies we prefer" and "bodies we do not prefer").

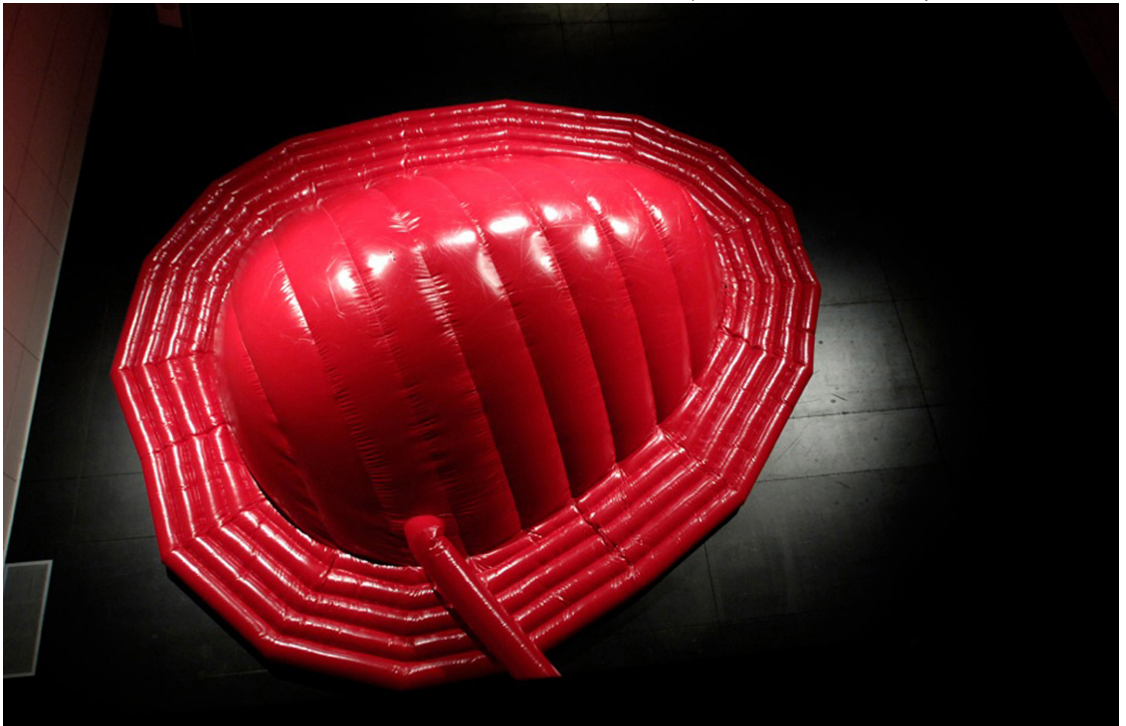
Cross' theoretical project focuses specifically on physical difference that can be discussed in terms of social value as expression of the extent to which a body is considered desirable. The "un-preferred" body is the body which nobody loves; more explicitly, the un-preferred body is the body that nobody can love.

As implied by his use of the word "non-preferred", Cross is less interested in engaging in investigation into the body itself, and more interested in society's response to it, through creating opportunities that encourage the audience to interrogate their role in a system which creates hierarchies of value based on physical appearance. These opportunities in Cross' art are extremely active, inviting the audience to literally climb onto the work.

*Pump* is a bright yellow inflatable that requires two participants to engage in a ridiculous yet intimate activity by wearing the object on their heads and inflating the object with foot pumps in order to maintain its shape.

David Cross, *Bounce* (2005)

Performance/installation, duration variable; vinyl, air blower, 7 x 5.5 x 1.9 m



*Bounce* is a large, bright red inflatable play structure that is set up in spaces which encourage the public to interact with, and play on it. Nothing about it appears out of the ordinary; hill-like, it presents a challenge to those interacting with it. In order to reach the summit, one must make a concerted effort to climb its smooth, steep surface. It is only upon reaching the top that the audience might discover the work's secret, and that they are implicated in the artist's physical discomfort, perhaps even pain.

Cross claims that he wants his work to be deeply affective through the engagement of imagery that is both attractive and repellant, leaving the viewer hovering in an uncanny in-between. His work seems to harness that space, not only in terms of the horrific (which visual and performance art is very good at exploiting) but the joyfulness of carefree play with which to butt it up against.

Though he denies that the work is intentionally masochistic, (and, having made work that is similarly physically taxing, I believe him), I would argue that Cross' *Bounce* employs Halberstam's "radical passivity" and "passive masochism" in order to, as Cross says in "Some Kind of Beautiful: The Grotesque Body in Contemporary Art", "create unresolvable conundrums" and "shift the participant's decision making to a level of uncertainty." One of the ways he accomplishes this is through the absence of instructions or rules of engagement with the work; the audience is left completely free to make up their minds about how to engage the work. By presenting the audience an ethical dilemma wrapped up in a tempting package topped with the prettiest bow of permission, Cross' work is not only aesthetically attractive and repellant, but conceptually as well. At the completion of their experience of the work, a participant is likely to be as affected by their own decisions regarding the work as they would be by the physical realities of the work itself.

## Mandy Espezel

Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada

Mandy Espezel is originally from the community of Fort McMurray, Alberta. Growing up in this isolated environment, located deep within the boreal forest, Espezel developed an appreciation for/awareness of the bodily intensity of productive and imaginative solitude. In 2002 they moved to Edmonton to attend the University of Alberta. After receiving their BFA in 2007, Espezel tried their hand at writing about art, and was a contributor to *PrairieArtsters.com*, the visual arts blog created by Amy Fung, and also co-authored the weekly column "Art Box" with Jill Stanton, published in the now defunct *SEE Magazine*. In 2009, Espezel moved to Lethbridge to pursue an MFA at the University of Lethbridge, which they completed in 2012. Engaged in a feminist-phenomenological discourse, their practice explores visceral manifestations of anxieties, fluctuating identities, empathy and otherness, and the subjective "autobiographical" as a force of influence in interpretation and production. They are currently based in Lethbridge, Alberta.



Mandy Espezel, *Heavy Tentativity* (2014)  
Wood, fabric and glazed ceramic, 16" x 11" x 46"

## A Deep Burn

Mandy Espezel's interest in interrogating their subjectivity as it relates to race and gender complicates their works; the art resides in the space between sculpture and performative object. Heads and faces are missing, therefore the audience's gaze is denied, and yet through their overt, objectified sexuality and submission they still foster a desire in the viewer for ownership and mastery. Mastery in this case means a desire to engage deeper ways of knowing through touch; Espezel's works beg to be felt, fondled, caressed, held. Thus the audience becomes the performer, and the Other. The sculptures clearly reside in the world of objecthood, and not thingness. Because they harness an artworld authority instead of a real-world one, they rely on that need to touch to create their performativity – not an immediate embodied performativity generated by “things” of the outside world, but a physical performativity produced through the action of the viewer in response to the physicality of the work.

As a list of objects, the works Espezel has included in *The Missing Body* read as uncomfortably comedic and uneasily sexual as they appear in person: one stubby leg with pink mary-jane; disembodied breast with erect nipple; matching right and left legs; kneeling torso with tan lines (no head); tiny figure, faceless. The sculptures and their sensual, tactile pedestals may beg to be touched, but they also fight against the viewer's prayers that no one should notice if they did, that the deep pile of the fun fur surface on which they rest leave no trace of their fingers. Many sculptures evoke the desire for a tactile experience; what makes Espezel's work performative is that the desire to touch her works is directly connected to the specific tensions the artist is hoping to create. These tensions are related not only to craving for haptic knowledge of the work, but to themes of sexuality, anxiety, embodiment, and identity (relative, especially, to gender, race, and class).

All the work in Espezel's series *A Deep Burn* are objects that are only fully knowable when touched. Curating them into a gallery exhibition is, in part, a function of deciding to resist the inherent normativity of the gallery space. Even if (or, some might argue, especially if) the artist and the gallery do not allow work to be touched, in the formal setting of the gallery the work becomes more performative because of the tension between desire and expectation; the desire for the haptic knowledge expressed by the work and the expectation of appropriate audience behaviour. Espezel's sculptural objects and the environments she places them in explicitly evoke this desire for a physical experience of the work, through the use of varied



Mandy Espezel, *A Wanly Pallor* (2014)  
Wood, fabric and glazed ceramic, 59" x 47" x 5"

textures, the scale of the work relative to the viewer's body and hands, and elements designed to provoke temptation to transgress the boundaries of the institution.

## Sam Guerrero

Portland, Oregon, U.S.A.

Sam Guerrero was born in East Los Angeles, California where he lived through his formative years. Growing up in Los Angeles and having a multi ethnic background takes priority in his work as he sorts through the diverse complexities of his identity. He uses personal experiences as a starting point often mining how they have influenced the way he organizes the world. Infusing pop culture and consumer aesthetics, Guerrero's work takes what's familiar and gives it new meaning. Guerrero received his BA at Azusa Pacific University and his MFA in studio practices from Portland State University. He has shown throughout the United States as well as South Korea and Canada. Guerrero currently resides in Portland Oregon where he serves as an instructor at Portland Community College.



Sam Guerrero, *Still Trying for a Breakthrough* (2012)  
Video stills

## ***Still Trying for a Breakthrough***

In *Mourning Sex*, Peggy Phelan discusses how, considering the spectator as the person in the dominant position, an inability to have one's gaze returned constructs the other's body as lost. The dominant figure cannot control that which cannot return its gaze; in the absence of eye contact, the observed body does not exist. Via this reading of the surveilled body, even those artists whose bodies are physically visible, if their vision is obscured, can be considered hidden. Sam Guerrero harnesses this approach in his piece *Still Trying for a Breakthrough* by encasing his head in a piñata; he resists the controlling power of the gaze, and performs in his own world.

The artist who hides their body within the performance does not have the opportunity to be a witness to the work, but nei-

ther does the audience have an opportunity to witness the performance in a traditional way. Phelan describes how the desire for mastery over that which is represented, which is created in the viewer through the process of looking, can best be resisted by denying the gaze. Representation fosters a desire for mastery/ownership; Phelan quotes Foucault's *History of Sexuality* (62):

“The agency of domination does not reside in the one who speaks (for it is he who is constrained), but in the one who listens and says nothing; not in the one who knows and answers, but in the one who questions and is not supposed to know.” **Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality***

As a description of the performer/viewer relationship, power belongs to the audience; the performer is put in a position of providing a service to another who controls the decision to accept or reject the offer. By removing their body from the performance and disallowing the viewer to confront their gaze, the artist resists not only objectification, but resists the propagation of the dominance of the viewer, and of the self as other. This is the process which Phelan refers to as becoming “unmarked”.

Even work in which a body appears to be present but the viewer's gaze is denied, this resistance can be harnessed. In encasing his head in a piñata in *Still Trying for a Breakthrough*, Sam Guerrero is not only cutting himself off from the outside world, he is refusing the viewer's access to his gaze. According to Phelan, “The spectator's inability to meet the eye defines the other's body as lost; the pain of this loss is underlined by the corollary recognition that the represented body is so manifestly and painfully there.” (*Unmarked* 156)

In his video for *The Missing Body*, Sam Guerrero battles with his internalized colonialism, literally trying to beat it out of himself. A colourful piñata encasing his head, the artist bashes himself with a stick in an attempt to free himself of the strictures of the cultural signifiers that mark him as other. As an artist of multiple ethnic backgrounds, Guerrero considers the piñata (with its own complicated history as an object used in indigenous rituals but adopted by missionaries as a Catholic pedagogical tool) an apt symbol for his hybrid identity. Because that multifaceted identity is hidden—because Guerrero reads as Hispanic within the dominant narrative—he is invisible within his work even when his body is present. Hiding his head inside a piñata renders this fact explicit; he is not a person, he is a caricature of a culture. Guerrero's rage seems at first to be misdirected at himself rather than the oppressive dominant culture; however, because that culture has so perfectly mapped itself onto his body and identity, the artist makes clear that lashing out is, eventually, much the same as ‘lashing in.’

Guerrero's deceptively simple work is multifaceted, allowing for many other readings – that he is trying to break out of a stifling definition of self which is suffocating him, that his perceived identity as a Hispanic man demands a level of macho masculinity with which he struggles to both maintain and free himself from, and that to shatter the confines of the external identifiers imposed upon him would release a shower of the treasures which are his potentiality.

## Guerrilla Girls Everywhere

The Guerrilla Girls are feminist masked avengers in the tradition of anonymous do-gooders like Robin Hood, Wonder Woman and Batman. How do they expose sexism, racism and corruption in politics, art, film and pop culture? With facts, humor and outrageous visuals. They reveal the under-story, the subtext, the overlooked, and the downright unfair.

In the last several years, the Guerrilla Girls have appeared at over 90 universities and museums, as well as in *The New York Times*, *Interview*, *The Washington Post*, *The New Yorker*, *Bitch*, and *Artforum*; on NPR, the BBC and CBC; and in countless art and feminist texts. They are authors of stickers, billboards, many, many posters and street projects, and several books including *The Guerrilla Girls' Bedside Companion to the History of Western Art*, and *Bitches, Bimbos and Ball-breakers: The Guerrilla Girls' Guide to Female Stereotypes*. They are part of Amnesty International's Stop Violence Against Women Campaign in the UK; they're brainstorming with Greenpeace. They have unveiled anti-film industry billboards in Hollywood just in time for the Oscars, created a large scale installation for the Venice Biennale, and organized street projects for Krakow, Istanbul, Mexico City and Montreal. They dissed the Museum of Modern Art at its own Feminist Futures Symposium, examined the museums of Washington DC in a full page in the *Washington Post*, and exhibited large-scale posters and banners in London, Athens, Bilbao, Montreal, Rotterdam, Sarajevo and Shanghai. The Guerrilla Girls could be anyone; they are everywhere.

“By refusing to participate in the visibility-is-currency economy which determines value in “the art world,” the members of the group resist the fetishization of their argument that many are, at the moment, quite ready to undertake. By resisting visible identities, the Guerrilla Girls mark the failure of the gaze to possess, and arrest, their work.” **Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked* 19**

The Guerrilla Girls have been hiding their bodies in their performances since the 1980s. They also harness radical negativity in the project of creating a utopia. Stickers and poster campaigns such as those undertaken by the Girls are performative in multiple ways; the act of political defiance in the act itself is a performance, though meant to be undertaken in secret, invisibly. Then the stickers and posters themselves

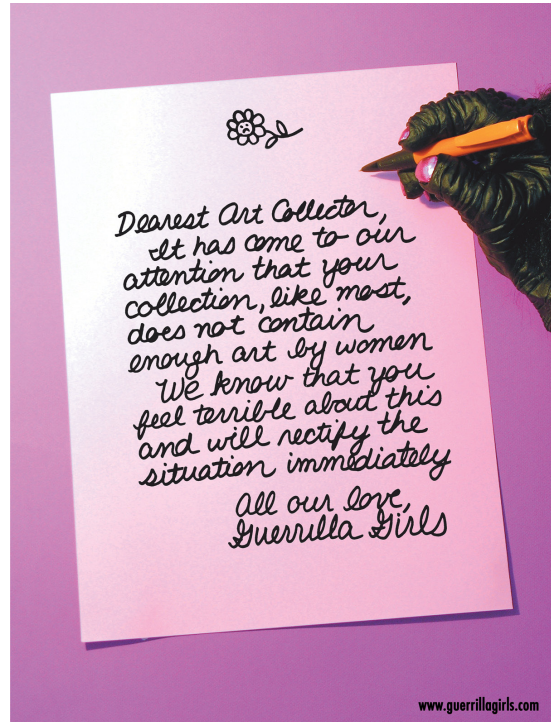


**Don't Stereotype Me!,  
Do women have to be naked to get into  
music videos? 2014,  
Free Women Artists, China,  
Token Times Newspaper,  
Traditional Values on Abortion,  
Guerrilla Girls' Pop Quiz, 1990,  
Dear Collector, 1989,  
Dear Collector, Greece,  
Art World Token, &  
The Advantages of Being a Woman Artist**

become sites for performance by the public, as they create a space for dialogue (e.g. people talking about them or writing on them), and evoke a physically performative response (defacing them, ripping them down). In *Cruising Utopia*, Jose Esteban Muñoz claims:

“The performances that the (stickers/posters) demand from viewers open the possibility of critical theory and intervention; they encourage lucidity and political action. They are calls that demand, in the African American vernacular culture, a response. The response is sometimes an outpouring of state ideology, yet at other times the responses are glimpses of an actually existing queer future in the present.... The (sticker/poster) functions as a mode of political pedagogy that intends to publicize the state’s machinations of power. While technologies of surveillance colonize symbolic space, the anonymous performance of (posting) contests that reterritorialization and imagines another moment: a time and place outside the state’s electronic eye. This working collective is watching the watcher and providing a much-needed

counter-publicity to the state’s power. In this work we also glimpse an avant-gardist sexual performance, which is to say a performance that enacts a critique of sexual normativities allowing us to bear witness to a new formation, a future in the present. “ **Jose Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia* 61**



above: Guerrilla Girls, *Dear Collector* (1989)  
below: Guerrilla Girls, *Do women have to be naked to get into music videos?* (2014)





above & left: Calder Harben, *FLAGGING* (2013)  
Photographs/performance



## Calder Harben

Toronto, Ontario, Canada

Cal Harben (b. 1986) is a Canadian artist whose work often takes the form of video, installations, and photography, and includes collaborations with artists, individuals and youths in site-situated projects. Their practice takes interest in experiences of duration, multiplicity, and queer embodiment; researching and producing images of double-goers: those who travel in circular motions of time, appearing and dispersing. Most recently, Harben's work is oriented towards opening up perceptions of, and applying a queer reading to, historicized public figures and landscapes. Harben received their BFA from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in 2009, and is currently completing a MA at Tromsø Academy of Contemporary Art in Northern Norway.

## FLAGGING

In Calder Harben's *FLAGGING*, the artist flew four flags, which they had collected from diverse artists, on a ship traversing the Arctic Ocean. The reasons each artist had for making these flags are as varied as the artists themselves, though one might guess that they were interested in searching for a community of peers, or staking claim to an identity that could be represented by their flag. By hoisting the flags of queer artists who have carved out particularly unique communities and identities, Harben extends the search for queer kinship and promotes solidarity between solitudes.

As a performance, the body of the artist(s) was/were multiply absent: the creators of the flags were thousands of miles away, and spread across the continent. Harben, who conceived, coordinated and enacted the work, was physically present at the site of the flag-raising and yet invisible within it. The performance was the flying of each flag; the audience, the deserted coastline.

Harben's work is particularly evocative of a queer utopia; in its search for a multiplicity of queer identities, they reject a heteronormative view of the world, imagining an impossible future that is not just unmistakably queer, but fundamentally non-binary in a way that gets to the heart of the project of Jose Esteban Muñoz' theory of disidentification. By suggesting that queer is not definable but instead a vast potentiality, Harben rejects the notion that queer is an alternative to hetero, reflecting and reinscribing it.

In their project description, Harben writes about the maritime system of flag signals. The word "flagging" also has another central meaning within this artwork. It refers to a method of silent queer communication often referred to as the hanky code, originating within the leather community, that allowed men to express their sexual predilections through the colour and location of their hanky in a way which was both invisible to the mainstream and simultaneously unmistakable to those within their group. In this way, Harben's *FLAGGING* is very much about the body; it expresses longing, a need for togetherness and physical connection. The flags do not simply say: "I represent the sovereign nation of No Pants No Problem," or "We are here on behalf of Ladies Who Stay Home With Their Cats." They say "I am here. Where are you?"

## Rachel Herrick

Raleigh, North Carolina, U.S.A.

Rachel Herrick (b. 1979) is a multi-media artist whose installation work has been the subject of activist and academic writing in the US, Canada, England, and Australia. In 2013, Publication Studio (in conjunction with the ICA in Portland, Maine) published Herrick's *A Guide to the North American Obeast*, a two-volume book set that elaborates on the obeast narrative and contextualizes the art project within a cultural and scholarly framework.

Herrick grew up on a subsistence farm in the hills of central Maine and relocated to North Carolina in 2004. She earned an MFA from the Maine College of Art in 2011 and a BA in Creative Writing from Methodist University in 2002. Herrick has been the recipient of several grants including a United Arts Regional Project Grant and a Puffin Foundation Grant.

## Museum for Obeast Conservation Studies (MOCS)

Rachel Herrick's *Museum for Obeast Conservation Studies (MOCS)* would quite literally be a faux-anthropological study of obese people, were it not for the fact that she recasts them/her (us) as not-human, as less-than-human, as, literally, beasts. Thus, her work is faux-zoological (studying those obeasts who still exist yet are endangered), faux-palaeontological (studying the extinct ancestors of the obeasts), and faux-cryptozoological (attempting to trace the history of creatures who many believe do not actually exist).

Through her complex series of strategies designed to both disarm/charm the viewer and implicate them in the sociological structures which created the problem she seeks to expose, Herrick's work straddles the line between complicity and antagonism (as an artistic strategy, following Bishop). Casting the viewer as a sympathetic "other," she creates an uncanny space where belief in the creature of the obeast—whose characteristics of laziness, gluttony and stupidity mirror the dominant narrative of fat people as lazy, gluttonous and unintelligent—forces the audience to both reaffirm that belief system and simultaneously resist their role in maintaining these systems. Rather than saying "I resist this untenable narrative, and attempt to change it" as a fat artist might be expected to (but cannot because her fat body renders her unable to communicate), Herrick sets up an opportunity for the audience to resist, and become the agents of change.

In her introduction to *Obeast: A Broader View*, Herrick asserts that “pleasantness is a preference people teach each other and ultimately use to establish and maintain social prestige hierarchies.” (ix) She goes on to describe how fat, as a substance and a physical attribute which in its essence is free from moral attributes, has been used to mark, in different time periods and different cultures, a range of social classes and statuses from the highest to the lowest, the most advanced to the most “backwards,” from the most beautiful to the ugliest. Today’s dominant narrative casts fat as not only lesser, but morally bankrupt, classifying “obesity” as not just a physical trait but a disease brought on by its victim, one which destroys the worth of its victim and makes it deserving of abuse and systematic oppression by the culture at large. Jenny Hagel notes in *Obeast* that:

“In our health-obsessed culture, we’re encouraged to judge people who aren’t on board. Strangers confidently order smokers to put out their cigarettes. Women admonish new mothers for not breastfeeding. Street-philanthropists give money to homeless people while lecturing them not to spend it on alcohol. And while there are, in fact, behaviors that are linked to poorer health, only obesity causes us to place people into an entirely different, lesser category. We see a smoker as a person who smokes. We see an obese person as less than human.” **Jenny Hagel in *Obeast: A Broader View* 44**

Jennifer Denbow’s *Obeast* essay further problematizes this concept, noting that via what Haraway terms a “logic of Discovery,” the scientist is the objective, active agent, while the object of study is passive; therefore, the scientist (or person who is studying something) who embodies any of the characteristics of that which s/he is studying cannot be objective; they are incapable of scientific distance and logic (50). Because of this, work done by fat people about fatness is treated with suspicion, and discounted wholesale. Herrick’s work puts this system on display, making science’s subjective position in furthering the dominant discourse transparent.

The history of the museum as the site for the entrenchment of a colonialist narrative is well-documented; *MOCS* literally “mocks the museum to expose both its colonialist discourse and its perpetration of the dominant gaze. At the same time, *MOCS* mocks the stereotype of the animalistic, lazy, dumb, and uncritical fat person.” (8) Herrick describes, as I and other fat artists have, that she came to an understanding of the need to create work that addresses the dominant narrative of fatness

not through an educational enlightenment or a pedagogic learning of the problem, but through her own embodiment being an impediment to making work about anything other than fatness. Even more broadly, she talks about an inability to develop an identity for herself outside the narrow range of characteristics that are culturally ascribed to the fat person. Instead of resisting, as many choose to do, Herrick said “Ok, fine. I’ll be fat just the way the world thinks I am. I’ll live the stereotype.” And thus, the obeast was born.

Herrick’s body is the model for all of the obeasts in her work, making her argument very pointedly; she’s not just talking about fat people theoretically, or fat people in general. She’s talking about herself. She is creating mute figures which are just as incapable of using their voice as fat people are. That her obeasts are jarring is in part because of their uncanny nature as replicas of Herrick’s own body, but also in great part because they are NOT simply replicas or mannequins, they are dead obeasts. In recreating the museum diorama, Herrick is forcing us to consider the fat person as an object suitable for shooting, stuffing, mounting, and putting on display for discussion about our grotesque nature.

In the case of objects which exist as stand-ins for the artist’s body, the question of whether performance can resist reproduction depends greatly on the kind of stand-in. Phelan insists that objects *can* act as the Self that casts the audience as Other. In Rachel Herrick’s *Museum for Obeast Conservation Studies* the artist is less interested in resisting and more interesting in harnessing complicity to deconstruct it from within. Her project of mimicking the museum depends entirely on a wholesale replication of those modes of reproduction that have been shown to be extremely colonial in their method and ideology. It is in the recasting of the audience as performers within the space that they become Other, and are forced to confront their belief systems from a new angle.

Herrick concludes: “If viewers are baffled by my implication that fat people exist outside and at odds with human culture, I hope that this bafflement persists outside the gallery space and into regular life.” (83) By harnessing complicity in the creation of a completely convincing unfathomable world within our own world, Herrick makes us aware of the amazing ability of our minds to believe just about anything, and goes one step further, in making us understand that in fact we do believe these untrue things.

right: Rachel Herrick, *Museum for Obeast Conservation Studies (MOCS)*



# Michelle Lacombe

Montreal, Quebec, Canada

Michelle Lacombe (Montreal, QC) has developed a unique body-based practice since obtaining her BFA from Concordia University in 2006. Purposefully minimalist, her work intertwines performance and drawing in a process of mark making that is sober, confrontational and tragic. Characterized by creative process that modifies and confuses the artist's body, her practice seeks to poetically collapse the spaces between a physical body (hers) and its counterparts (textual bodies, representations of bodies, bodies of land, etc.). Her work has been show in North America, Germany, the UK and France in the context of performance events, exhibitions and colloquiums.

Lacombe's practice as an artist is paralleled by a strong commitment towards feminist community and the development of critical and alternative models of dissemination for live art and undisciplined practices.

## Portrait of a Salty and Barren Body

Michelle Lacombe is interested in a return to the body; her work focuses on not just the body in performance, but on her body in particular. In our initial conversations about her potential participation in this project, Lacombe expressed surprise that I would consider her work suitable for examination in relationship to the body's absence within the performative space. Perhaps her surprise uncovered what I think might be the biggest paradox of this exhibition: that of examining work in which the body is absent which also engages in discourse about the body. Or, rather, work which explicitly uses the body's absence as a way of making the body that much more visible.

Through the intrinsic concept of loss, in *Unmarked*, Peggy Phelan explains performance art's "fundamental bond" with ritual (152), especially in performance that uses physical pain, via its evocation of the (symbolic) death of the performer, which elicits a promise to remember that which is lost.

Lacombe's work is literally ritualistic in its repetition of action, marking of the body, observance of lunar cycles, and reference to blood. In her work for *The Missing Body*, not only is the body absent, but the ritual is denied us, leaving only a trace of the action and the body in one. If performance is a call to



Michelle Lacombe, *Moon Grid*, July 2013—July 2014  
Photographs/performance

witness the death of the performer, Lacombe's work, which is fundamentally about the body, frustrates the viewer's expectations: the performer is dead. They have arrived too late, missed their cue; their role is redundant. Thus Lacombe's work exists within this new mode of the unmarked. It exists to fulfill itself, performs in our absence, and leaves a representation of the body that is not a reproduction. It creates a fully realized Self with no Other.

Are Michelle Lacombe's pools of saltwater stand-ins for her body, or traces of a performance for which there was no witness? From the salty traces that form Michelle Lacombe's *Portrait of a Salty and Barren Body*, a performance has apparently happened, and all that remains is the stain on the floor. This stain (which in the contemporary performance world might be called 'residue' or 'ephemera') is the trace of the performance that is left behind as evidence to future audiences—those who were not witness to the action. In *Cruising Utopia*, Jose Esteban Muñoz claims that queer gestures are "vast storehouses of... history and futurity" (81) and that those gestures' ephemera are a crucial part of the work. Muñoz was referring to the trace left behind in the memory of those who witnessed the live performance of those meaningful gestures, but I would suggest that the trace of those gestures is meaningful and impactful even for those who did not directly witness their performance. Especially if we agree that the primary role of the visual in our

creation of knowledge is in upholding the dominant narrative, there are other ways of experiencing the knowledge embodied by physical gesture that do not rely on visual proof of the action. Lacombe's *Salty and Barren Body* is proof that those gestures are still knowable.

All the work in the series *Of All the Watery Bodies, I Only Know my Own*, of which *Portrait of a Salty and Barren Body* is a part, focuses on blood, water, tides, and lunar cycles. It references well-worn imagery of the fertile (cis-gendered) female body, and is very much about the artist's relationship to her own corporeality. The manifestation of the work in terms of the audience's interface with it, however, is less clearly corporeally-centered. One of *Watery Bodies'* significant recurring gestures is monthly tattooing, with water instead of ink, of horizontal lines around each leg at the level to which her blood, pooled in her hollow body, would reach. This action is performed privately with her tattooist, making it a performance that triply removes the body: first, the tattooist is the primary actor in the work while Lacombe is the acted-upon. Second, the performance happens in the absence of an audience. Third, though the artist has a photograph taken on the newly re-inscribed bloodline after every fresh application, she does not consider this to be the method by which the work will circulate as an artwork, rather imagining it, in her artist statement, presented as "an oral presentation, a text, a visual work, etc". Other pieces of this project—photographs of the moon taken monthly by the artist, and the work in this exhibition (the volume of her blood in saltwater allowed to dry on the floor of the gallery)—actively remove the artist's body from the work while reaffirming it as the subject of the art. Even in oral presentation/lecture performance that relies on her retelling of the story of the work's creation, where her body is obviously present, Lacombe denies her (current, lecturing) body's presence as the locus of the work, saying, in essence, "I have to tell you about this performance in words because I can't show it to you with my body; the work is not here." In this way Lacombe iterates another of the work's themes – that of "overlapping cycles of movement towards erasure." (Lacombe, 2013) Just as the tide erodes the land in waves and the tattoo erodes the flesh while the body heals and scars, the body's presence is situated, erased, re-situated, and erased through the performance, its invisibility, its retelling, and the denial of its presence.

## Naima Lowe

Olympia, Washington, U.S.A.

Naima Lowe's works in performance, video and text have been seen at the Athens International Film and Video Festival, Ann Arbor Film Festival, Anthology Film Archive, The Knitting Factory, The Wing Luke Museum of the Asian Pacific Islander Experience, The Stella Elkins Tyler Gallery, The International Toy Theater Exhibition, and Judson Memorial Church. Her first film "Birthmarks" was a Student Academy Awards Finalist, won Best Experimental Film at the Newark Black Film Festival and was honored for Best Sound Design in the NextFrame International Student Film Festival. Her collaborative performance and installation *Mary and Sarah and You and Me* made its New York debut at the historic Judson Memorial Church.

Lowe's 40 page, limited edition, looseleaf book *Thirty-Nine (39) Questions for White People* was shown at the Wing Luke Museum in Seattle from May–November 2013.

Naima teaches media and visual arts at the Evergreen State College in Olympia, WA.



Naima Lowe, *Thirty-Nine (39) Questions for White People* (2013)  
Ink on notecards, ribbon; 5" x 8"



Naima Lowe, *Richard Simmons 'Til You Die* (2009)  
Video still

## **Richard Simmons 'Til You Die**

In *Richard Simmons 'Til You Die*, Naima Lowe attempts to (symbolically) kill the body hatred that led to her being in possession of Simmons' *Disco Sweat* exercise video by (literally) killing the tape, by playing it over and over until it dies. Asking volunteers and viewers to participate in this methodical destruction through performance invites them into her experience; to relive the exhausting history of body dissatisfaction and trying endlessly to change one's body. By removing herself from the work, Lowe invites others to perform it, not only sharing in the physical labour but the emotional burden of cultural body oppression. This work harnesses the potential of radical negativity (as discussed by queer theorists such as Muñoz, Sedgwick and Phelan) to create new politics, new connections, and new identities. In *The Queer Art of Failure*, J. Jack Halberstam talks about how absence can lead to a certain kind of knowledge, how loss can be queer, forgetting can be a tactic used to resist the dominant narrative, and denial of the self/persona can be a revolutionary act. Referencing moments in history where the colonial power has used the tool of forgetting to dominate occupied cultures (via forced relocations, removal of children from their families and cultures, etc.), Halberstam suggests that artists can harness similar tactics to forget the narrative that has been inscribed upon them and create a new one. Losing can be used in a similar way, exploiting witlessness, stupidity and forgetfulness that may be ascribed to oneself or one's culture in order to ignore and push back against those who would underestimate them. *Destroying Disco Sweat* is a ritualistic forgetting of Lowe's body history, and a rewriting of that history as one of love and strength.

## **Thirty Nine (39) Questions for White People**

Lowe's work *Thirty-nine (39) Questions for White People* not only resists visibility, but it actively resists the neoliberal longing to feel better and forget, for race issues to go away. While Phelan would describe language as being in the realm of the reproductive, the visible, the marked, in *The Feeling of Kinship*, David Eng calls for a reconsidering of the rift between affect and language, further to his project to reunite affect and history. Affects, in other words, need not be oppositional to language; they can be supplemental. *Thirty-nine (39) Questions for White People*, based entirely in language, also exists in the realm of the performative and not the reproductive. I suggest that the main difference between Eng's interest in resisting visibility but using language and Phelan's interest in keeping language out of the project of resisting visibility is that Phelan's work, based in psychoanalytic theory, constructs Self and Other in a way which privileges gender as the binary on which her ideas of "difference" are based. Eng's work, on the other hand, is based in critical race studies and literature; he recognizes that racialized histories are constructed, contested, multiple, non-binary, not clearly demarcated, and that language is a conduit for ideas/memories/stories which are valuable for reconstructing, maintaining, and distinguishing personal and group identity while resisting visibility.

“

Lowe's work ... not only resists visibility, it actively resists the neoliberal longing to feel better and forget, for race issues to go away.

”



## Cheli Nighthtraveller

Montreal, Quebec, Canada

Eng does recognize a need to revisit history, but describes historical revisionism and political reparation as futile; that attempts to construct a picture of “the way it really was” (192) are not possible. Instead, he suggests that “psychic reparation”, through affect, can create connections to the past that are anchored to the present and therefore tangible and real. Lowe’s work can be read as an attempt at psychic reparation of this nature; of using a series of questions directed at white people to harness the power of affect in reconsidering histories and “realities.”

In *Thirty-nine (39) Questions for White People*, the audience performs the work through not just reading the questions, but by considering them. They are performing a transgression of the politeness of the presentation space, and a transgression of the expectation that whiteness—the dominant narrative—not be challenged. Lowe describes *Questions* as “an exercise in turning the emotional labor of racism into tangible physical labor.” (Naima Lowe, project description, 2013) The creation of the book was itself a performance: the performance of creating an object from a history of pain. Having done the doubly hard work of experiencing the racism and creating the labour-intensive object, the presentation of the work creates an opportunity for the audience to perform the work by trying to answer the questions, and confronting the implications those answers make.

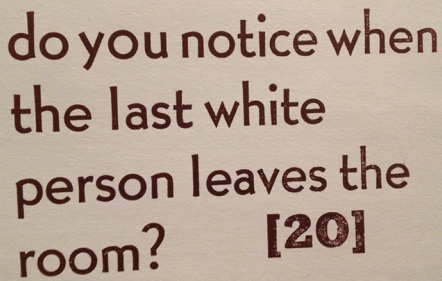
In *Unmarked*, Peggy Phelan noted Adrian Piper’s demonstration that “part of the meaning of race resides in the perpetual choice to acknowledge or ignore its often invisible markings.” (7) Lowe renders that choice (literally) legible through her book of questions, and in presenting it as a book, resists her own retraumatization.

Cheli Nighthtraveller (Cree, Saulteaux, Caucasian) is a multimedia artist who tries to open cultural space for subjective exchanges through sharing directly her own singular experiences with trauma, identity and cultural questioning. Mentored by women artists in the Aboriginal and Artist-Run Centre communities of Saskatchewan, she found her voice first in video and then in performance art. She has participated in artist residencies, performance festivals, group and solo shows across Canada, including the 7a\*11d International Festival of Performance Art (Toronto), Latitude 53’s VisualEyez Festival (Edmonton), Sâkêwêwak Artists’ Collective, (Regina) grunt gallery (Vancouver), The Western Front (Vancouver), Eastern Edge Gallery (St. John’s), AKA Gallery (Saskatoon), TRIBE Inc. (Saskatoon) and others. Her ultra personal work has been described as “generous”, “whimsical”, “unsettling” and “outsider art from an insider perspective”. Based out of Montreal, QC she is currently finishing an undergraduate degree in animated film at Concordia University’s Mel Hoppenheim School of Cinema.

Nighthtraveller sends special thanks to Abby Morning Bull (Piikuni Nation of the Blackfoot Confederacy) and Joel No Runner (Blood Tribe of the Blackfoot Confederacy).

### The Wooden NDN

When I started working as Programme Coordinator at AKA Gallery in Saskatoon in 2000, the gallery was fully scheduled until early 2004, providing me with plenty of work to do but little creative input. One of the first things I did was to open up a gallery in our tiny bar fridge. I called it the Frost Free Gallery, and I set out to pair shows in the main gallery with shows in the fridge. It was a way of stimulating dialogue about the art, and about the nature of the gallery—in particular the miniature/provisional gallery spaces that seemed to be popping up everywhere—and of keeping creatively engaged in my job. I also instituted and curated a year-round performance art series which ran for the 8 years I was employed there; while that would probably be interesting to talk about in the context of this essay, that’s a story for another time. The Frost Free Gallery ran for 4 years (until we left our old home and moved into a space where the fridge would no longer be accessible to the public); during that time I asked each of the participating artists to write a text about their work, reflecting on the nature of the gallery.



do you notice when  
the last white  
person leaves the  
room? [20]

Naima Lowe, *Thirty-Nine (39) Questions for White People* (2013)  
Ink on notecards, ribbon; 5" x 8"

I selected work for the Frost Free which seemed to have a natural affinity for the refrigerator-cum-gallery: an exhibition about genetic engineering in foods by Tracy Susheski, a piece by Carolyn Meili about polar bears which inhabited the freezer compartment, art featuring meat, leftover cookies and cake, boxes of chocolates, magnetic fridge poetry, and even beer (which the public was invited to consume). *Armed Invasion Begins in the Kitchen*, a show by Aaron Sennitt, was a stack of postcards in the fridge upon which was inscribed the Portuguese adage after which the exhibition was named. Based on the concept that the home and the kitchen are sites of power, the show aimed to “arm” our audience with the nourishment of the art from the fridge, asking them to take the cards away and disperse them into the world. I found the most successful and the most exciting Frost Free projects to be those that actively engaged not only the work in the main gallery and the notion of the gallery itself, but dynamically activated the fridge, such that opening it up became a performance. Whether drinking a beer, taking a postcard, or simply considering the stale food products in the fridge provided the audience a way of engaging with the art which did not ask of them anything more or less than any other interaction with a gallery or refrigerator anywhere else (you enter the gallery, you consider the contents, you take what you want/need) and yet almost all of these exhibitions made the audience into performers of their work through their embodied experience/relationship to the work.

One of the first artists shown in the Frost Free Gallery was Cheli Nightraveller, who wanted very explicitly to do a performance art project in the fridge. I could not fathom what she intended to do, though I imagined that it involved trying to squeeze into a very tiny space. When the day of the installation arrived, I saw that Nightraveller had created surrogates for her performance art mentors and idols; they were names inscribed on mothballs, floating in a giant pickle jar filled with a vinegar/water/baking soda solution (if I remember my elementary-school science correctly) so that they gently floated up to the top of the jar and down, over and over again, performing a choreographed dance all day for the audience of paper cutout dolls which inhabited the other shelves of the fridge. This was the first time I'd encountered an artwork described by the artist as a performance, but in which there was no live body present—certainly not the artist's own! Though it spent a long time germinating deep in my subconscious mind before I formulated any ideas about the nature of this kind of work, the text Nightraveller wrote to accompany the work has informed my thinking about performance in the absence of the artist's body as a meaningful strategy towards myriad worthwhile goals.

The text accompanying Nightraveller's show, *Namedropping*, is on the opposite page.

Since that work, Nightraveller has continued to address the concept of performance through work from which the body is absent, while for nearly a decade simultaneously performing works in which her body was extremely present. Known for her powerfully affective work, Nightraveller makes art that recreates moments from her life—her mother's smile, the death of a childhood pet rabbit—and which demonstrate her struggle to find her place in the world. Perhaps that is what triggered her strong impulse to leave her physical body out of the performance, to remove it from the time and space of the performative act; that removing her body from her performance functions to protect her mental and physical health, and to avoid having her traumas revisited upon her.

In Nightraveller's more recent performances, those in which the body is notably absent, she toys with the ideas of subject/object and animate/inanimate. The animate/inanimate dichotomy, for Nightraveller, emerges in part from her First Nations heritage, but also her readings of the philosophy of resistentialism, founded in 1948 by Paul Jennings, who claimed “Les choses sont contre nous;” “Things are against us.” Russell Baker, following Jennings, later created three categories of objects: “those that don't work, those that break down and those that get lost.” (*TEXTiles*, 2009) Based on the notion that all objects “carry malicious intent and resist the will of mankind,” as Nightraveller puts it, resistentialism allows her to transfer the performative impulse into objects which become the actors within her artwork; not as in kinetic objects which move and therefore embody the action of the art, but objects which in fact contain a consciousness and a will to perform. Nightraveller expects the gallery, the curator and the public to treat these conscious objects as such. For her participation in *TEXTiles*, curated by David Garneau for the Art Gallery of Regina in 2009, Nightraveller sent Xistchian, a stuffed toy squirrel she fashioned out of a sock, with explicit instructions for his care and feeding, of which she expected to receive documentation as proof that he was being properly tended to. While she claims space as the author of the work, she simultaneously makes room for the performing object-subject to claim its own agency as the performer. In so doing, Nightraveller is saying ‘my body may not be present, but I still claim the territories of performance. I want my presence to be acknowledged; I demand to be seen.’

Nightraveller quite literally demands to be seen with her project for *The Missing Body*. Her wooden Indian, a cigar-store

“ I am taking this opportunity to raise questions about the role of the gallery. I have more questions than answers. However, I am approaching this conundrum from my own gallery EXPERIENCES.

Sometimes it seems the four white walls of a gallery are restrictive and inhibiting to forming personal relationships (that which I value most about a gallery experience), but PERHAPS if we confront the RESTRICTIONS, we can loosen up and truly inhabit the gallery.

The people who inhabit the gallery are my Art Stars, especially the ones who make it all happen, not just the artists.

HOW DOES A PERFORMANCE ARTIST TAKE UP SPACE?

Can a space be a gallery if it is uninhabitable?

Is there room in a gallery for more than one “Art Star”?

Should a performance continue if there is “no one” present to witness it?

HOW DO YOU DECIDE THE VALUE OF AN ART EXPERIENCE?

IS THERE A PLACE FOR YOU IN THE FROST FREE GALLERY? ”

Cheli Nighthtraveller, *Namedropping*

Indian caricature cobbled together from a mess of cultural symbols and stereotypes, is actually a hollow prop designed to carry the performer into spaces from which a First Nations presence is palpably absent, manifesting both as an exaggerated presence and an acknowledgement of its absence. Noting how the climate of a conversation changes once a First Nations person makes their presence known (often because the conversation impacts or is about First Nations people and yet their voice has been absent thus far), Nighthtraveller decided to provide the service of an Indian-for-hire; someone who will provide a visible presence for First Nations people at an event and yet remain (thankfully, stoically, appropriately) silent, while bearing witness to the conversation.

Performance in the absence of the artist's body, considered apart from the artist's body entirely, allows the artist to talk about and do things that performance, singularly, can do, while shedding those markings of the explicit body and the ghosts that inhabit them.

Performance that involves the audience activates, potentially, both an explicit and an implicit body. In Cheli Nighthtraveller's work for *The Missing Body*, her body is, essentially, both present and absent simultaneously. Communication between the artist and the audience is essential to the work, but that interaction exists, even through the absence of interaction, as an implied understanding that the artist is present even if she is not known for certain to be. Cheli Nighthtraveller's work in this regard is slippery; her body is certainly lost, but as the strategy she employs relies on the viewer's belief that the body is present, the presence of the Indian/box itself is designed to make audiences uncomfortably aware of her presence as witness to their performance of dominance.

Adding several complex layers to the work is the fact that at any given appearance, Nighthtraveller may or may not be inside the work; either because one of her collaborative assistants is inside instead, or because no one is. In Marcus' terms, Nighthtraveller's strategy employs the use of anthropological complicity as the outsider who recognizes themselves as the traditional object of study and therefore is particularly sensitive to the outside, and also perhaps relatively uninterested (because of that history of being subject to unethical anthropological treatment) in being overly sensitive to those who it has turned the gaze back upon. In this way, Nighthtraveller is a metaphorical correlative for the conundrum of Schroedinger's cat; she is simultaneously both in the box and not in the box. The fact that she is sometimes in the box and sometimes not is her way of not just resisting that dominance but asserting her own.

Nighthtraveller's work has continued to address the notion of the animate/inanimate in First Nations culture through her pointed use of the animated object/animal. Having "animated" the rabbit and the squirrel in past performances—through the use of costume, storytelling, anthropomorphization of both toys and live animals—Nighthtraveller's relationships with her subject-objects (she converses with them, has emotional connections to and with them, and respects their opinions about her/their work) provide a worthwhile model of study on the nature of "live" when it comes to live performance. Must "live" mean breathing, blood-pumping, brain activity, or can it simply mean in the here and now? If standard definitions of performance art agree that performance art involves the presence of a body in space over time, and we having taken pains NOT to define what a body is lest we start to exclude those whose bodies are unfamiliar to us in their supposed shortcomings (missing limbs, for example) or artificial additions (prosthetic or cyborg attachments), or the space they inhabit, we must agree that the only person who can define what the body is in any given performance is the artist. I can imagine a none-too-fanciful future in which people might inhabit the world via robotic surrogates, for safety or comfort or due to illness. And what of virtual performance? Second Life has already shown us that what a "body" is, relative to the word "live", is extremely flexible. So if the artist claims that an object has a consciousness, that she has communicated with it, and that it has agreed to perform on her behalf, (and, whether this is relevant or not, let's say that the artist believes all this too), is there anyone who could say otherwise?



Cheli Nighthtraveller, *Binky Binky Bunny* (2006)  
Performance/installation



Mami Takahashi, *Hiding/Observing* (2012)  
*Capsule on Grass*

## Mami Takahashi

Tokyo, Japan

The human body is a tool for communicating, and often, we have very little control over what our body tells others. In her painting, performance, video, and photographic work, Mami Takahashi explores the boundaries between the public and private self, the differences in social norms between cultures, and the expressiveness of the body. In her performative works, Takahashi uses herself as the subject in order to evoke the sense of alienation, displacement, and misunderstanding that occurs when one is between cultures as well as to explore the ways in which we unintentionally give away personal information through our actions and expressions.

### *Hiding/Observing*

In her work, Mami Takahashi considers how the body performs at all times—even when we would rather it didn't—and that it performs texts for the public that we might prefer to keep confidential. *Hiding/Observing* offers the audience a twice-removed body; the body is hidden in the performance, and the performance is presented to us only through documentation—not dissimilarly to Lacombe's work, though to different ends. Takahashi wants her body's invisibility to be rendered hyper-visible. Her comic attempts at hiding are presented as dramatic failures; her feet sticking out from underneath a foil invisibility pod make her not only quite visible, but mark her as having botched the performance of a simple act of going unnoticed. The second half of the gesture of the performance, *Observing*, implies both a desire to fit in and a suspicion of the society from which she hides: observing in order to learn and perhaps become more like, or perhaps as a type of undercover reconnaissance, an uneasy mistrust of her surroundings.

Takahashi's farcical visibility in her *Hiding/Observing* project

still allows her to avoid becoming owned by the spectatorial gaze. She, however, can see through the non-mirrored side of her protective mylar shell; her gaze may not be returned, but while her body is lost to the watcher, she makes of them the watched.

The photographs in *Hiding/Observing* are documents of performances about resistance to visibility, partly as a way to defy surveillance by the dominant culture and partly as a way to examine that culture unobserved. Her work points out the strategic benefits of resisting visibility in providing a vantage point from which one might be the watcher instead of the watched. Her images embody two stereotypes of the Asian Other that she may have confronted during her immersion in American culture—the “shy” and the “spy”—but they do so by declining to picture her. By refusing visibility via a gesture that represents disparate affective positions, Takahashi confuses expectations and rejects any sort of construction of her identity by the viewer. This kind of image, as Eng describes it, is:

“less representational than emotional, and marked by the failure of language; this image is dissociated from the traditional protocols of signification and accompanied by an excruciating affective intensity that alludes, while simultaneously demanding, symbolic inscription.” **David Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship* 168**

Considering herself between cultures—no longer in Japan, not yet American—Takahashi’s performances render her a ghost. She is neither “here” nor “there”. In fact, denying the existence of a “here” and a “there,” the artist is half-visible, half-invisible; neither as present as she would like at times to be (in being understood, in taking up space as an invisible “other”), nor as absent as she would like to be able to be when she so desires (as one who sticks out because they are different). This work highlights the frustrating duality of the “other,” then: being simultaneously supervisible and invisible, whose actions and embodiment are scrutinized by the dominant culture and yet whose experience is not recognized, or worse, denied.

Visibility, Eng suggests, is one strategy among many; a strategy that should not be discarded. Visibility can be used to depict a version of the present, as long as it is used in a way that resists the dominant narrative; any attempt to correct history will simply be absorbed into this narrative. He suggests that the realm of the affective is more impactful than that of the visible, and that the best attempts to draw attention to the invisible are not in making them visible but in replicating their invisibility. (180-183) Nightraveller, Lowe, Takahashi and Guerrero all

make the invisibility they are addressing in their work extremely evident—not visible—but affectively known.

## Cindy Baker

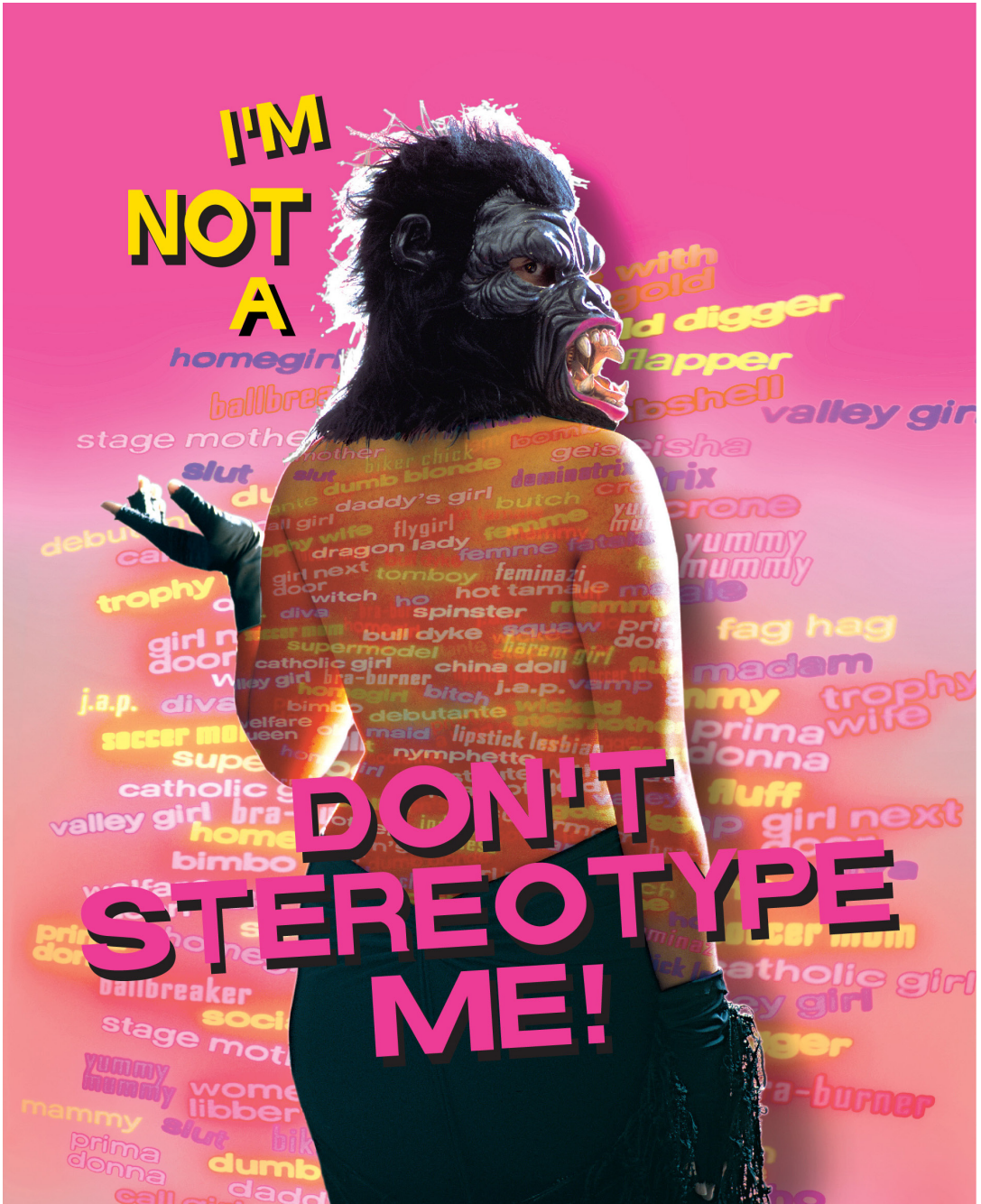
Cindy Baker’s interdisciplinary and performance work is informed by a fierce commitment to ethical community engagement and critical social inquiry. Drawing from queer theory, gender culture, fat activism and art theory, Baker’s research-based practice moves fluently between the arts, humanities, and social sciences.

Baker has exhibited and performed across Canada from Open Space in Victoria, BC to Eastern Edge in St. John’s, NF, and internationally in cities including Los Angeles, CA, the Soap Factory in Minneapolis, MN and ANTIFest in Kuopio, Finland. She is represented by dc3 Art Projects in Edmonton.

Baker’s practice draws from two decades of experience in artist-run centres, as well as extensive volunteer work in art and queer communities; she has worked in non-profits throughout Western Canada, including AKA Gallery (Saskatoon). Currently based in Lethbridge, Alberta, Baker has recently completed an MFA at the University of Lethbridge where she held a SSHRC grant for her research in performance in the absence of the artist’s body.

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I'M  
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A

with gold  
gold digger  
homegirl  
flapper  
ballbreaker  
bshell  
valley girl  
stage mother  
slut  
dumb blonde  
daddy's girl  
biker chick  
geisha  
dominatrix  
crone  
yummy  
mummy  
tomboy  
femina:zi  
hot tamale  
girl next door  
witch  
spinster  
mammy  
girl nazi  
supermodel  
harem girl  
fag hag  
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catholic girl  
china doll  
madam  
j.a.p. diva  
bimbo  
debutante  
vicious  
prima wife  
soccer mom  
welfare queen  
maid  
lipstick lesbian  
donna  
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catholic girl  
valley girl  
bra-burner  
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welfare  
libber  
mamma  
slut  
biker  
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donna  
dumb  
daddy  
call girl

DON'T  
STEREOTYPE  
ME!



# Acknowledgements

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 Catherine Ross  
 Kevin Sehn  
 Stefanie Snider  
 Kasia Sosnowski  
 Andrea Webster



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## Artists' Websites

Vito Acconci	acconci.com
Blair Brennan	blairbrennan.com
David Cross	davidcrossartist.com
Mandy Espezel	mandyespezel.com
Sam Guerrero	samguerrero.com
Guerrilla Girls	guerrillagirls.com
Calder Harben	calharben.com
Rachel Herrick	rachelherrick.com
Michelle Lacombe	everythingidoordonotdo.blogspot.ca
Naima Lowe	naimalowe.com
Cheli Nighthtraveller	twitter.com/TheWoodenNDN
Mami Takahashi	mamitakahashi.virb.com

left: Guerrilla Girls, *Don't Stereotype Me!* (2003)  
 Poster design

## Galleries

### **Southern Alberta Art Gallery (SAAG)**

601 3rd Avenue South, Lethbridge, AB

#### **June 27–September 7, 2014**

Vito Acconci, *Touchstone (for V.L.), Trademarks, & Kiss Off\**

Blair Brennan, *Blood + Time*

David Cross, *Pump*

Mandy Espezal, *A Deep Burn*

Mami Takahashi, *Hiding/Observing*

\*(on loan from the University of Lethbridge Art Gallery)

### **Dr. Foster James Penny Building Gallery**

324 5th Street South, Lethbridge, AB

#### **August 15–September 6, 2014**

Guerrilla Girls, *various projects*

Calder Harben, *FLAGGING*

Rachel Herrick, *Museum for Obeast Conservation Studies (MOCS)*

Michelle Lacombe, *Portrait of a Salty and Barren Body*

Naima Lowe, *Thirty Nine (39) Questions for White People*

Cheli Nightraveller, *The Wooden NDN*

### **CASA**

230 8th Street South, Lethbridge, AB

#### **August 15–September 6, 2014**

Sam Guerrero, *Still Trying for a Breakthrough*

Rachel Herrick, *Museum for Obeast Conservation Studies (MOCS)*

### **Guerrilla Girls Campaign**

All over Lethbridge

Bus shelter on 4th Ave. near 6th St.

#### **August 11–September 8, 2014**

## Events

### **Friday, June 27**

SAAG, 5pm

**OPENING RECEPTION**

### **Wednesday, August 13**

CASA, 7pm

Guerrilla Girls Skype-in

### **Friday, August 15**

Penny Building Gallery, SAAG, CASA, 7-10pm

**OPENING RECEPTIONS** w/ live performance @ Penny:

Cheli Nightraveller, *The Wooden NDN*

### **Saturday, August 16**

Galt Gardens (behind SAAG), afternoon

David Cross, *Bounce*

Cheli Nightraveller, *The Wooden NDN*

Obeast Games

### **Tuesday, August 19**

3rd Avenue downtown

Cheli Nightraveller, *The Wooden NDN*

### **early September**

Location & time TBA, 24-hour marathon

Naima Lowe, Richard Simmons *'Til You Die*

### **Friday, September 5**

University of Lethbridge, noon

Naima Lowe Speaks in Art Now

### **Friday, September 5**


Penny Building Gallery, SAAG, CASA, 7-10pm

**CLOSING RECEPTIONS**

[facebook.com/themissingbody](https://www.facebook.com/themissingbody)

RSVP for free Guerrilla Girls Skype-in: cindy.baker@uleth.ca



The background is a vibrant red with a fine, woven texture. Two circular holes are positioned horizontally, one on the left and one on the right, which together with the surrounding texture create a face-like appearance. The lighting is even, highlighting the texture of the material.

**The Missing Body: Performance in the Absence of the Artist** is a multi-site exhibition, curated by Lethbridge-based Cindy Baker, focused on expanding discourse around activist strategies of invisibility and the nature of performative art. The twelve international artists in **The Missing Body** create performances in which their bodies are obscured, hidden, or simply not present in the final manifestation of their work.