

Body as Artifact

A Value-Theoretical Reading of Ana Mendieta and Cassils

Savannah Whaley



I first encountered Cassils's *Becoming an Image* (2012–present) at Oakland Museum of California's *Queer California: Untold Stories* in 2019. In the exhibition, images of the performance are hung in a horizontal line around a darkly lit room, with a bronze cast of a clay block in the room's center. In the performance Cassils, lit only by the intermittent flash of a camera, “unleash[es] an assault” on a 15-hundred-pound block of clay. They “literally beat the material, molding a form” (Cassils n.d.). They also “mold” their own bodily form: the artist undertook combat conditioning to prepare for this work, recounting how they had to “shed mass, [...] train towards explosive movement, precise form [...] I also had to train my heart and lungs to operate at over 170 beats per minute” (in Getsy 2015:269).

The *Queer California* exhibition, which explored the state's underrecognized queer histories, situated Cassils's performance within a broader historical landscape of the interrelation between the expansion of an enforced gender binary and the expansion of capitalism. Pivotal to the exhibition—and to my reading of Cassils's artwork—are historical records documenting the enforcement of strict gender binaries and modes of reproductive control. These were violently imposed on indigenous groups in California from 1769—when Franciscan missionaries first established their evangelizing outposts or “missions” as part of a wider settler-colonial project beginning in the

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1500s (White 2019; Madley 2019:17; Castañeda 1998:230, 234). These mechanisms of colonizing the “lands and bodies” of indigenous peoples across the US (Driskill 2016:44) ensured the expansion and eventual domination of capitalist gendered relations.¹

In 2018, Cassils performed *Pressed* as part of *Cyclic*, a performance series with Ron Athey and Fanaa in Biosphere 2 (MOCA 2018; Jones 2020:389).² Biosphere 2 is a huge earth science laboratory in Tucson, Arizona, which was designed to be the second fully self-sufficient “biosphere” after Biosphere 1 (planet Earth). Today, the laboratory houses research into—and creates an atmospheric respite from—the effects of the climate crisis. In a room called the “Lung,” the artist struggles against a 100-pound pane of glass. *Cyclic* (2018) is explicitly framed in relation to mysticism and the occult (it is part of the MOCA Tucson exhibition *Blessed Be: Mysticism, Spirituality and the Occult in Contemporary Art*), but the staging of the performances positions them in relation to the material distortions and effects of capital accumulation. The audience enters to a soundscape by Kadet Khune of animals that have gone extinct since Biosphere 2 was built in 1987 (MOCA 2018; Jones 2019). The very existence of the research center speaks to the ravaging impact capitalist development has had on the planet.

Pressed responds to and reframes one of Ana Mendieta’s earliest performative actions. In *Untitled (Glass on Body Imprints)* (1972), Mendieta presses a sheet of plexiglass (which acts as a referent for the “glass” in the title of the work) against her naked body, pulling, tugging, and pressing herself against it. In places her flesh is taut, and in others it wrinkles and folds over itself. She pushes and pulls her facial and bodily features—nose, mouth, buttocks, breasts—out of shape. The performance destabilizes a familiar bodily grammar of the feminine, and the gendered body that Mendieta examines and distorts is one distinctly shaped by racialization. The series title emphasizes a relation between two entities: “imprint” denotes a figure or mark impressed on another, more malleable, substance. In the photographs that comprise *Untitled (Glass on Body Imprints)*, the sheet of plexiglass is not always, or easily, visible. In some closer-cropped frames, the edges of the glass pane can’t be seen at all. It is thus primarily visible through its effects on Mendieta’s body. In these images, the matter of Mendieta’s body appears to be shaped by a “determinate absence”—an abstract force that has concrete effects on the artist’s body (Toscano 2014:1233).

Untitled (Glass on Body Imprints), *Pressed*, and *Becoming an Image* are performance works that denaturalize the gendered body in ways that reveal that body to be imbricated with capitalism’s drive to accumulate surplus-value. Gendered and racialized hierarchies have come to function

Figure 1. (previous page) Cassils, Pressed, Performance Still, 2018. Biosphere 2, Oracle, Arizona. Videography: Graham Kolbeins. Part of Cyclic, a performance series by Cassils, Fanaa, and Ron Athey. (Courtesy of Cassils)

Savannah Whaley teaches and researches theory and performance studies. She is coeditor of The Body Productive: Rethinking Capitalism, Work and the Body (2022), and is working on a monograph that makes a critique of political economy central to understandings of performance, gender, and the body. savannahwhaley@gmail.com

1. In *Asegi Stories*, Qwo-Li Driskill is specifically discussing two-spirit and queer people among the Cherokee of the southeast; however they also argue that, “More broadly [...] all Indigenous people became characterized through dominant European gendered frameworks that constantly placed Indigenous people in positions to be colonized” (2016:44). See also Andrea Smith, who argues that “gender violence is not simply a tool of patriarchal control, but also serves as a tool of racism and colonialism” ([2005] 2015:1).
2. All analysis of *Cyclic* (2018) is based on the recording of the performance filmed by Graham Kolbeins and available on Vimeo (<https://vimeo.com/326521561/f33d999004>).

as a required auxiliary of capital accumulation. These hierarchies are produced and maintained through direct forms of violence as well as abstract compulsions that nonetheless have material repercussions. In the interplay between setting and action, bodily and nonbodily material (through pressing and impression), and presence and absence, Mendieta and Cassils convey a “felt sense” (Salamon 2010:2) of the relationship between the particularities of sensory embodied experience and the capitalist totality. These works thus enable a new articulation of the body in performance: as an aesthetic *artifact*, a conceptualization that lays bare the body’s relationship to the capitalist mode of production.

Moving beyond approaches in the field that emphasize the materiality of nonhuman matter as commensurate with the materiality of the body,³ I draw attention to how, within capitalism, the concrete is always in relation to, and organized by, abstractions.

Value, Abstraction, Artifact

My reading of Mendieta and Cassils contributes to a growing turn in the humanities to Marxist analysis that engages with how capital is reproduced within but also beyond the wage relation.⁴ This value-theoretical approach understands capital

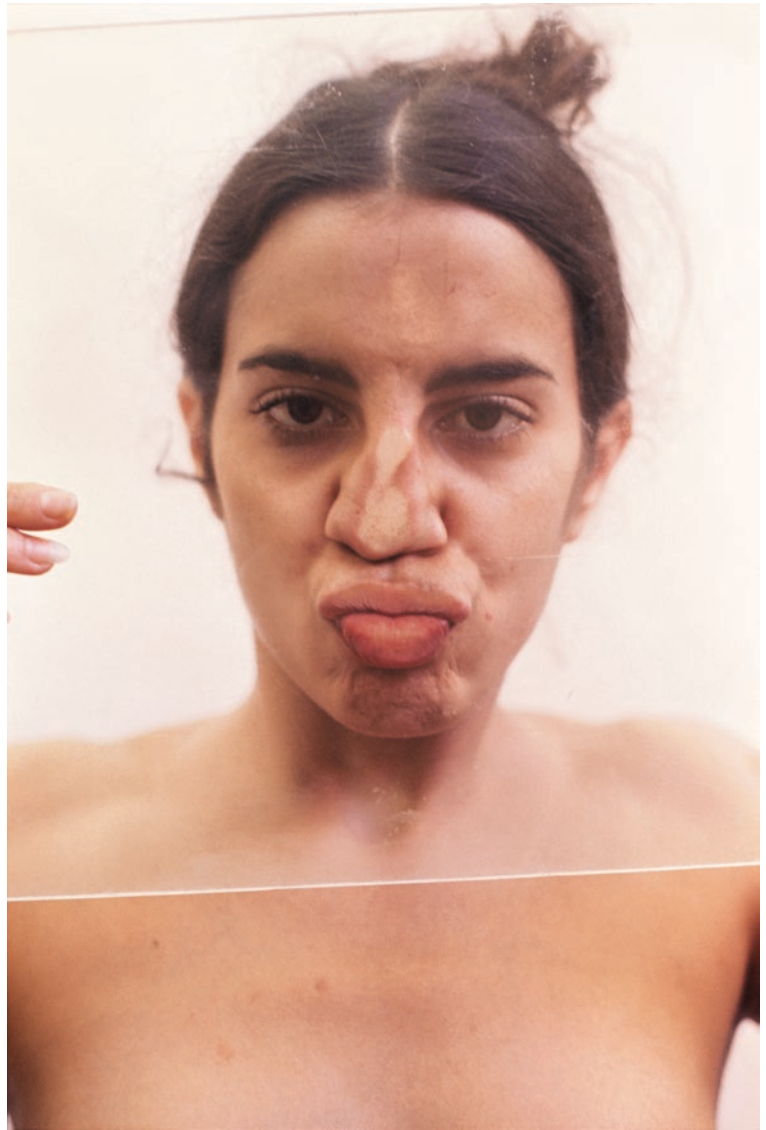


Figure 2. Ana Mendieta, Untitled (Glass on Body Imprints), 1972. Color photograph. (© The Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection, LLC; courtesy Galerie Lelong & Co. Licensed by ARS, NY 2023)

3. See, for example, Amelia Jones’s “Material Traces: Performativity, Artistic ‘Work,’ and New Concepts of Agency” (2015). For more New Materialist approaches to performance, see *TDR*’s 2015 special issue, “New Materialisms and Performance Studies.” Relatedly, recent special issues of *Performance Research* include “On Diffraction,” which turns to “entanglement[s] of non/human agencies” (2020); “On Animism,” which offers understandings of relations in the world “not limited to those of human ‘actors’” (2019); and “On Hybridity,” which includes an engagement with how being human “entails an ever-complex entanglement with non-human materiality” (2020).

4. See for example the *TDR* special issue “Performance and Reproduction” (Capper and Schneider 2018). “Living Labor,” a conference organized by Joshua Lubin-Levy and Aliza Shvarts at NYU in 2014, and the subsequent special issue of *Women & Performance*, set out to probe the resonances between Marxian theories of labor and value and the

as a force that mediates—to a greater and lesser degree, and often in contradictory or incomplete ways—all social life.⁵

The accumulation of surplus-value is the driving force of capitalism.⁶ Value is an *abstraction*. On the first page of *Capital*, Marx describes how, in capitalist societies, wealth “appears as an immense collection of commodities” ([1867] 1990:125). A commodity is a good intended for exchange. In order for two or more commodities to be exchanged, they need to be equated quantitatively, and it is therefore necessary to *abstract* from their “use-value”—from the concrete, qualitative characteristics of the object that make it useful or desirable. To produce both a use-value and an exchange-value, the labor that goes into making commodities must have a correspondingly twofold character (concrete and abstract). Value is an abstraction, then, because it abstracts from the concrete characteristics of a commodity (and of the labor that produces it) to quantitatively compare goods and services that are qualitatively different.

This process which, Marx says, takes place “behind the backs” of its producers, has determining effects on lived social relations ([1867] 1990:135). When society is organized around the exchange of commodities, everybody must follow the logic of exchange in order to survive (Heinrich [2004] 2012:46). Here, we can see how value theory “reinterprets” Marx’s analysis as a *social* theory (De’Ath 2022:230). Value itself is “purely social,” expressing the “equal social validity” of two concretely different forms of labor; it is a “specific social relationship” (Heinrich [2004] 2012:61).

A commodity’s exchange-value is not a natural property of that thing, it is a social one: the result of a society organized around the exchange of goods. In this system predicated on the generalized exchange of commodities, social relations are inverted. Because producers first come into relation with each other through the exchange of commodities, a social relationship between producers appears as a relationship between things. We might think, here, of the glass in *Untitled (Glass on Body Imprints)* and *Pressed* as a useful metaphor: a material that can be seen through (that makes things appear) but that can also obscure, and one that is produced through the melting (distortion) and cooling (fixing) of materials. Abstractions, variously distorting and fixing the concrete, work in part through processes of obscuring and revealing—we both do and do not see what is going on behind them.

As such, capitalist value is a “real abstraction”: something which, while irreducible to “a single place or time,” nonetheless concretely organizes social relationships (De’Ath 2022:227). Processes of abstraction, taking place “behind our backs,” compel individuals to adhere to logics of accumulation through indirect compulsion as well as through forms of direct domination. Rational norms

“social, aesthetic, and political dimensions of performance and performativity” (2016:115). In 2019, “After Post-Marxism,” a conference at UC Berkeley, brought together humanities scholars whose attention to the production of value enabled a move beyond the legacies left by strands of 20th-century Marxist thinking that set up oppositions between class and identity, culture and economy, and form and history. A 2020 issue of *Platform Journal*, “Theatres of Labour,” edited by Meg Cunningham and Clio Unger, thinks about the connections between theatrical labor and other kinds of work, and asks how theatre might be able to stage a labor politics. Jaswinder Blackwell-Pal et al. published “Marxist Keywords for Performance” in 2021, which defines several key Marxist terms that are useful to and frequently used in theatre and performance studies. *After Marx: Literature, Theory, and Value in the Twenty-First Century* edited by Colleen Lye and Chris Nealon brings together a number of essays “pursuing fresh ways” of thinking about cultural production through Marx (2022:1).

5. “Value theory” has developed out of new readings of Marx from the 1960s, particularly in Germany, that sought to develop a Marxism distinct from the “actually existing socialism” of the period (see De’Ath 2022:227-28; Endnotes 2010; Bellofiore and Riva 2015). This work gave attention to some of Marx’s previously overlooked texts such as the *Grundrisse* (Marx [1939] 1993). De’Ath argues that this approach is “particularly well suited to reading gendered literary texts,” a method I expand here to performance (2022:227).

6. Surplus-value is “the excess [of value produced by the worker] accrued [by the capitalist] over the original value advanced [...] Surplus value accrues when a capitalist pays a worker a sum of value in wages that is less than the total value a worker confers to the final product” (Boyle 2017:10).

and modes of thinking, including those relating to gender and the body, come to be shaped by capitalism's economic imperatives.

This process with its attendant distortions begins in the sphere of production, but as Marxist feminists from the 1970s onwards have shown, the socially and economically devalued labor of social reproduction is essential to the production of surplus-value and reproduction of capitalism more broadly.⁷ Bringing Marxist-feminism together with value theory reveals how lived categories such as gender are mediated by value and its accumulation, and function as kinds of abstraction too. While gendered difference precedes capitalism, under capitalism, gender has been instrumentalized to become a mechanism of economic devaluation. “Women” are those whose labor goes un- or lower-waged and is socially devalued, and yet is essential to the production of capitalist value. Gender “functions *for capital*” as “differential, as a socially arbitrated and ideologically naturalized gap in wage levels (whether women are waged or not) across which surplus value flows” (Clover and Spahr 2016:299).

This differentiation is produced through abstraction. Because biological reproduction amounts to a “potential disadvantage” on the labor market (because having a child at least temporarily removes a worker from the production process), capital differentiates those with the (apparent) potential to have children from those without, constituting an “abstraction, a *gendered average*” (Endnotes 2013; see also Vogel [1983] 2013:151). All persons with a uterus (or those assumed to have one) are differentiated in this way, even if they cannot or will not ever have children. “Woman” flattens the various particularities of those it categorizes in order to produce a group whose labor can be economically and socially devalued. This process of feminization collapses multiple and various experiences and embodiments together (and divides others) in complex and often contradictory ways, producing internal forms of differentiation and hierarchization (between trans and cis women, for example, or through racialization), which play out socially and economically.

This framework sets out the theoretical scaffolding for my reading of Mendieta and Cassils. *Untitled*, *Pressed*, and *Becoming an Image* extend and augment the theory through their engagement with gender's “aesthetic and sensuous” qualities (Gabriel 2020). The setting of Cassils's *Pressed* in Biosphere 2 frames the artist's struggle against the pane of glass within a dystopic postindustrial landscape. Cassils's return to Mendieta draws out what I read as already implicit in *Untitled (Glass on Body Imprints)*: that there is a fundamental connection between the violence of gender and the violence of colonial capitalism, and that this plays out on and through the body as an *artifact* of capital accumulation.

Understanding the body as “artifact” positions the body as an outcome, rather than a precondition, of an economic system predicated on the accumulation of surplus-value, and an instrument of that accumulation (Vishmidt 2020:42). “Artifact” describes the body's dialectical relationship between concrete and abstract. It defines the body as fetish-object in Marx's sense: while value is a *social relation* between producers, this social relation takes on a “spectral objectivity” (Marx [1867] 1990:138–39). Value, an abstraction and a relation between people, appears to be an objective, “socio-natural” property—something objective and contained within the commodity (Marx [1867] 1990:164–65).

Building on the work of François Guéry and Didier Deleule from 1973 (but only translated into English in 2014), who conceive the body under capitalism as a “productive body”—as something that has been transformed into a mechanism of the production of value for capital—Marina Vishmidt describes this body as an artifact of a capitalist mode of production and power regime (2023:73).

7. The 1970s Wages for Housework movement theorized the structural necessity of women's unwaged and lower-waged labor to the reproduction of workers for capital. Key theorists included Silvia Federici, Selma James, Leopoldina Fortunati, and Mariarosa Dalla Costa. Before this, in 1949 Claudia Jones identified the triple oppression black women in America face: “as workers, as Negroes, and as women,” thus connecting the historic and social position of black women with their economic position ([1949] 2011:75).

The development, and the effects, of the productive body are not limited to the sphere of production but are reinforced and reproduced continually in scientific, medical, political, and cultural spheres in ways that obscure its relation to capital. The body as producer of value—its “modern idiom”—comes to appear as something natural that preexists capitalism (Vishmidt 2020). Its artifactuality relies upon, and in part effectuates, its own obfuscation.

What remains vital about the late-1960s turn to the body in art is how this work “privileged or prioritised the *contingent materiality* of the body of the performer,” troubling “the body” as a natural fact, particularly in its gendered and racialized formations (Johnson 2019:3; emphasis added). I develop Vishmidt’s work by bringing her use of “artifact” together with a historical use of the term specifically in relation to performance art: in 1975, art critic Max Kozloff grappled with the status of the body as artwork through the notion of the “artifact.” What distinguishes body art from other art forms, he argues, is that what the artist produces—the “artifact” of the artistic process—becomes the “receptacle of the art action.” The work’s usually hidden “instrumentality” becomes the “corporeal base” of the work itself (Kozloff 1975:30). The artist transforms their body into an artifact of aesthetic production, and this artifactuality designates, simultaneously, the tool of production and its outcome. To define the body as artifact, then, is to emphasize its existence as an effect, rather than a precondition, of a process of aesthetic production.

I take up Cassils’s notion of “beat[ing] material” and “molding a form” to articulate the contradictory (simultaneously productive and destructive) impulses of capital accumulation. Gender is produced and maintained through direct forms of violence (“beat[ing] material”), *and* through indirect compulsions (“molding a form”) that nonetheless have material consequences. Mendieta and Cassils stage experiences of the body as artifact as a constitutive interplay between “abstract” forces and “concrete” materials, which conveys how, when it comes to the body, these categories cannot be separated: there is no “concrete” (or “natural”) body that is not mediated by capitalist abstractions (gender, value).

Mendieta and Cassils convey experiences of embodiment as shaped by abstract (unseen, sensed rather than thought) forces that compel bodily behaviors, presentations, and interpretations. They also present this embodiment in relation to violence: to the direct forms of domination that shore up the gender binary in the service of capital accumulation. Reading Mendieta and Cassils through a Marxist-feminist framework that is attentive to the abstracting moves of value, and to the determining and distorting effects of capital accumulation, which is capitalism’s primary drive, makes it possible to understand the interacting production and function of gender and sex, and some of the ways these are conditioned by race. Such a reading reframes these artists’ engagements with the body as articulating the *felt effects* of the capitalist system: the relationship between the sensory and the structural.

Body Imprints

In 1980, Mendieta cocurated *Dialectics of Isolation: An Exhibition of Third World Women Artists of the United States* along with Kazuko Miyamoto and Zarina (Hashmi). It took place at Artists in Residence (A.I.R.) Gallery, founded and run by a group of (predominantly white) women artists with the explicit intention of offering a platform to women artists in New York. Mendieta writes in the exhibition catalogue: “During the mid to late sixties as women in the United States politicized themselves and came together in the Feminist Movement [...] they failed to remember us.” Calling out North American feminism for being a “white middle-class movement,” Mendieta defines the exhibition as an assertion of her “personal will to continue being ‘other’” (1980). In this catalogue, Mendieta historicizes the “homogenous male-dominated culture” of her contemporary moment in the US as a legacy of exploitative and racist European colonialism. Mendieta links the racism of the feminist movement, and the racial exclusions of the category of “woman,” to a longer history of racial capitalism. She illustrates how, as Maria Lugones argues, racialized women have been variously incorporated into and excluded from the category of “woman” depending on how it “it fit the processes of global, Eurocentered capitalism” (Lugones 2007:203).

I read Mendieta's use of her body in light of these statements. *Untitled (Glass on Body Imprints)* is part of a wider project of work that tested, transformed, and, in some iterations of her later *Siluetas Series* (1973–1980), disappeared the body entirely (see Blocker 1999:17). In *Untitled (Glass on Body Imprints)*, Mendieta pushes and pulls the matter of her body out of shape. The mood of the images is ambivalent. In one photograph, Mendieta's nose is pressed against the glass, her top lip pulling upward and exposing her teeth, like a child pressing her face against a windowpane. The image might be read as funny and playful, as might another where the plexiglass sheet presses onto the artist's pouting mouth, which splays outward, while she looks directly through the glass and into the camera, straight into the eyes of the viewer. Other images are more violent. In one, the side of Mendieta's face is crushed against the glass, her eyes closed, her cheek, mouth, and nose warping sideways, looking painfully distorted. In another, the edge of the pane cuts into her eyebrow, which is being dragged upward, her left eye squinting half-closed.

Critics have discussed *Untitled* in relation to gendered violence, remarking on the force of the glass that impacts the artist's body, recalling a face and body being assaulted (see Alvarado 2015:72; and Viso 2004:25). Mendieta "mold[s] the form" of her body through physically forceful actions ("beating" material) that evoke gendered violence. Hinged to its representation of gendered (domestic or intimate partner) violence, this performance stages capital's mediating function—the indirect domination of gender as a capitalist abstraction—as having material repercussions. Direct violence and the threat of it disciplines those marked as women and reproduces a gendered hierarchy (see Butler [1990] 2007:190–91), but gender is also compelled in less direct ways.

In *Untitled (Glass on Body Imprints)* the glass distorts the soft, fleshy areas of Mendieta's body, her breasts, thighs, stomach, and buttocks; bodily markers that—particularly the breasts—designate a "positive confirmation of sex" (Salamon 2010:113). In one of the most extreme distortions of her body, Mendieta pushes the clear pane up against her front, pressing her left breast downward, and cutting sharply into her right breast across the nipple, forcing her flesh up and over the hard edge of the glass. The glass causes her skin to fold over itself, dragging wrinkles across her chest. Mendieta's body is slightly twisted—her right shoulder is a few inches higher than her left, and her right arm juts out and around the glass to where her hand holds it at the bottom. The bottom half of the artist's face is in the frame, chin slightly tucked, mouth closed. In another torso image, the artist is side-on to the camera, the pane pressed against her right side, squashing her breast flat and splaying it outward, the sharp outline of the flesh against the glass like the sharp edges and flat surface of a cut of meat. Again, here, the breast is distorted, and her nipple and a few dark hairs around it drag uncomfortably against the glass.

By shoving her body against the glass, Mendieta disrupts a discrete "male/female" dimorphic bodily distinction: the series performs a kind of denaturalization of the feminine through reorganizing the matter of the body.⁸ The pane works as a lens through which the viewer can scrutinize the feminized body, which is simultaneously distorted through this relationship to the glass and, as such, to the viewer's gaze.⁹ The process of appearing through the glass is simultaneously a distortion—it both reveals and obscures.

The framing of these works as "imprints" positions Mendieta's body as something that is being marked by a harder material. Imprint also implies an absence: an imprint marks an impressed outline by pressing into a substance and then being removed, leaving a mark in its absence.

8. As Maria Lugones notes, in the US "the law does not recognize intersexual status." She refers to Julie Greenberg to argue that "legal institutions have the power to assign individuals to a particular racial or sexual category" (2007:194). According to Greenberg, "Sex is still presumed to be binary and easily determinable by an analysis of biological factors. Despite anthropological and medical studies to the contrary, society presumes an unambiguous binary sex paradigm in which all individuals can be classified neatly as male or female" (2002:112).

9. As Leticia Alvarado argues, "the clear pane and its positioning of the viewing subject makes the audience recipients of the moment of collision, making spectatorship an act between material and representational violence" (2015:71).

The clear pane is not always visible to the viewer but is registered *through its effects* as Mendieta's body is twisted out of shape by a seemingly absent force. Here, Mendieta conveys the indirect compulsions that gender deploys: the numerous ways in which psychic and embodied behaviors are directed and delimited "by forces that somehow always feel elsewhere" (De'Ath 2022:236).

Untitled (Glass on Body Imprints) not only distorts gendered signifiers, but also racial epidermal ones. In several of the images, patches of Mendieta's skin blanches white. In one that frames her torso side-on, distorting the shape of her breast, a strip of skin on the right side of the artist's body blanches white under the pressure of the contact with the glass. By emphasizing racial epidermal signifiers as she distorts the feminized markers of her body, Mendieta draws a connection between the two.

The contingency of 1970s feminist inclusions reveals the contingency of the category of woman more broadly, a dynamic that shaped Mendieta's experiences in the US from the time she moved from Cuba to Iowa at the age of 12. Mendieta manifested an aberrant femininity because she was racialized as nonwhite within the US (see Hyacinthe 2019:244–48). She was taunted with racial slurs at school and received anonymous phone calls telling her to "go back to Cuba, you whore!" She later told Cuban television that, "since I look Latin, I was always 'la putica,' the little whore, to them" (in Blocker 1999:53).

Mendieta's insistence on the body's materiality is important because feminization (which does not only affect those categorized as women) as a devalued relationship to value production is frequently naturalized through recourse to bodily matter. The performance engages with abstraction's sensory and aesthetic effects: gender imprints upon and takes shape through the matter that it organizes, producing differentially valued subjects. Race operates in tandem with gender to hierarchize within (and to mark the limits of) the category of woman. Hierarchized social categories differentialize between groups in order to produce relations of "severe inequality" that capital can move through (Melamed 2015:77). The devaluation of feminized labor is justified through biological narratives (a "labor of love"); as Leopoldina Fortunati demonstrates ([1981] 1995:21), and Maya Gonzalez elaborates, reproductive labor is "biologically assigned" to women (2013). Mendieta stages a kind of dislocation between the abstract category of gender and the concrete materiality of the body, disrupting the body as a signifier of sex or gender and refusing the universalizing (and therefore abstracting) function of the implicitly racialized, Eurocentric category of "woman."

As such, Mendieta's denaturalization of her feminized, racialized body is antagonistic to capital's instrumentalization of it: the visual and the haptic become modes that are constrained by but can also disrupt capitalist epistemologies and ontologies of the feminine. The violence of some of the images signals the violence that shapes the production of the body as a gendered artifact for capital. The images stage the impact of the relationship between the structural and the particular—of the "terribly concrete effects" (Toscano 2014:1235) of gender as a capitalist abstraction. This reading makes explicit what is implicit in Mendieta's work, drawing out what her performative actions and resultant photos are able to figure that the theory alone cannot. Mendieta encourages us to read the material and the figural together; by staging the matter of the body as in a contingent relation to an abstract force, she conveys a sense of the mediating relationship between capitalism's abstractions and bodily matter.

The Weight of Abstraction

In *Pressed*, the sheet of plexiglass that Mendieta holds in her hands in *Untitled* becomes a 100-pound glass pane that is placed on top of Cassils, who lies flat, face-up, on the ground (MOCA 2018). Their body is muscular: the glass presses down on and emphasizes the hard definition of their stomach, thighs, breasts, and buttocks. Like Mendieta's performance, Cassils's interaction with the glass highlights a distortion of parts of the body that provide a "positive confirmation of sex," however unlike Mendieta, Cassils's body troubles this "positive confirmation" (Salamon 2010:113). Cassils's muscular form resists binary gender codes, and this disruption extends beyond the time and space of the performance: Cassils's production of an aesthetic artifact in their work is inseparable from

their production of their body outside it. In *Cyclic* (2018), their struggle with the glass is a show of physical strength that is the result of years of body building, a practice central to their art. For Cassils, the gendered body is not a fixed precondition of art or of social life, but processual and transformable, mediated by the social. In *Pressed*, this mediation plays out through the categorizing gaze of the public, underpinned by the reality of increased violence towards transgender people, particularly transgender women of color, and by the legal and social repression of trans people's rights and lives, which has intensified in recent years (MOCA 2018).

Cyclic (2018) is performed in one of the domed "Lungs" of Biosphere 2, the large-scale, manufactured ecosystem figured as a kind of body (Nordeen 2019; Jones 2019). This anatomical framing invites a connection between the bodies of the performers and the "body" of Biosphere 2: for Amelia Jones, the "lung seems to breathe Cassils, as they breathe laboriously back" (2019). The center was launched and initially funded with the support of Ed Bass, a billionaire businessman, as the home of Space Biospheres Ventures' (ultimately unsuccessful) experiments for colonizing Mars (Biosphere 2 2023). Built to "develop self-sustaining space-colonization technology" (Biosphere 2 2023), the Tucson research center exemplifies an imperialist urge to expand US and global-hegemonic social life, and Bass's wealth marks the contradictions and resultant extreme inequalities that the capitalist mode of production compels and enables. Biosphere 2 has since been turned into a research center for technological solutions to the environmental impact of global capitalism, which *Cyclic* foregrounds through Khune's soundscape as audience members enter the space. Since 2011, it has been operated by the University of Arizona.¹⁰

In a white-blue light surrounded by darkness, Cassils heaves and pushes the glass. They struggle to turn onto their front, dragging the glass against their naked body as their limbs and torso drag on the ground. Cassils gasps and grunts under the weight of the glass and through sheer physical exertion. As they lift the pane upwards, their arms stretch across its width and one hand runs down its side. The audience can hear the glass scrape and grind across the floor, and the risk of the artist dropping the huge pane that might shatter on the ground feels heightened as Cassils loses their grip more than once, their hand slipping down the edge of the pane. I wonder if the edges are sharp and if the artist will cut themselves. As they heave the pane up onto an edge, and use the whole of their body and head to push it to vertical, their face pushes against it too, nose splaying outward, in a moment that mirrors one of the performance stills from Mendieta's *Untitled*.

Cassils's performance responds to the "pressure of visibility" that trans people have borne in recent years. In this setting the artist's engagement with gender is also an engagement with the wider historical context in which social life is shaped by the environmental repercussions of capitalist growth. If the glass in Mendieta's *Untitled* offers an aesthetic representation of the felt sense of gender as an abstraction, in *Pressed* the experience of gender becomes a relentless struggle, always just a slip away from slicing Cassils's flesh.

The term "pressed" retains a sense of relation between materials, however this relation is weightier than Mendieta's "imprints." In *Pressed*, there is an explicit sense of constraint. The relationship between body and glass is onerous; the "double-edged glass sword" (MOCA 2018) of increased trans visibility that the action responds to is presented as a weight. The glass pane both clarifies and distorts: it draws attention to the act of looking at the artist's body, and while the contours of their body are made acutely visible through it, the action's emphasis on constraint and struggle highlights the distorting (and contradictory) effects of this visibility—and of the process of abstraction that this visibility relies on. Greater recognition coincides with a compression into

10. The Biosphere 2 website explains: "The property was sold June 4, 2007, to CDO Ranching and its development partners who then leased the property to UArizona from 2007–2011. The enclosure now serves as a tool to support research already underway by UArizona scientists. As a laboratory for large-scale projects, such as the Landscape Evolution Observatory, the university's stewardship of Biosphere 2 will allow the UArizona to perform key experiments aimed at quantifying some of the consequences of global climate change" (Biosphere 2 2023).



Figure 3. Cassils, *Becoming An Image Performance Still No. 1. Edgy Women Festival, Montreal, 2013. c-print face mounted to Plexiglas, 36 x 24 in. (Photo by Cassils with Alejandro Santiago; courtesy of Cassils)*

legible categories: these categories necessarily have distorting effects, because they abstract from the particular. There is a dialectical tension between distortion and revelation that mimics and is tied to the nature of value, which organizes the social in ways that can be felt but not always consciously thought or seen.

Cassils’s handling of the glass feels precarious but also powerfully skilled. They struggle with the glass but never drop it, and they never move out entirely from underneath it until the end of the action. Eventually, after “what seems like forever” (Jones 2019), Cassils heaves the pane upward, onto a corner edge, raising themselves slowly onto their feet. They wobble from foot to foot for a second, gaining balance, before starting to walk around the pane, spinning it slowly. Every muscle in their body is tense, their arms outstretched holding the pane upright, their stance poised, and their gaze fixed intently ahead of them, on (or through) the glass. Cassils’s breath is ragged, yet for a brief moment the heavy, solid matter of the glass appears to be weightless in their grasp, reflecting light as it spins. These few seconds offer a reprieve from the

otherwise relentless struggle, implying perhaps that this struggle can yield fissures and fractures in the often overwhelming distortions of gender.

A Dialectic of Presence and Absence

In Cassils’s ongoing performance work, *Becoming an Image*, the artist’s investment in “molding a form” and “beating” material articulates how gender is reproduced: capital determines gendered social life *indirectly* (through economic and social compulsions—including, for example, the erasure of transgender lives from official histories); and directly through forms of violence that discipline nonnormative gendered behaviors. Cassils situates this performance specifically in relation to histories of LGBTQ struggle. *Becoming an Image* was first performed in 2012 at the ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives in Los Angeles, “inspired by the collections of the oldest active LGBTQ organizations in the United States” (Cassils n.d.). Initially conceived as a site-specific performance,

the work has since been presented around the world.¹¹ *Becoming an Image* (2012–present) was commissioned as part of the exhibition *Cruising the Archive*, for an event that addressed “the ‘Ts’ and ‘Qs’ [transgender and queer people] often missing from historical records” (Steinbock 2014:261). Cassils wanted to draw attention to “the fact that many of our genderqueer and trans brothers and sisters are 28-percent more likely to experience physical violence,” that in 2012 murders of transgender people increased by 20% globally, and that transgender people of color face disproportionate levels of harm (Cassils 2013). *Becoming an Image* directly engages with the disciplining and devaluation of nonnormative genders. The site-specific performance illuminates an institutional erasure, an indirect, slow form of violence that writes nonnormative genders and sexualities out of historical records.¹² Being written out of (obscured from) history in this way makes trans and nonbinary genders less legible and naturalizes the gender binary. This process works to minimize transgender experience and in turn legitimize the economic and social devaluation of these groups.

The economic and social devaluation of nonnormative genders works in the service of capital accumulation. Trans and nonbinary people face a “transgender pay gap,” have more precarious access to formalized work, and frequently are met with transphobic hiring practices (Gira Grant 2014:9; *Decriminalized Futures* n.d.; Fitzgerald et al. 2015). As such, they are more likely to have to accept lower paid jobs with worse conditions. This is an example of capital’s indirect compulsion towards gender conformity. At the same time, trans people are disproportionately the targets of violence (including interpersonal, police, and border), which works in tandem with indirect forms of compulsion to shore up gender norms. Cassils’s performance, set in the ONE Archive, stages their articulation of trans embodiment in direct relation to records that engage with the historic regulation and devaluation of LGBTQ groups, but in an archival collection that also reproduces an erasure of gender nonnormative communities.

Becoming an Image conveys an interaction between broader state and structural conditions and sensate, embodied experience: between the systemic and the particular. As such, the performance allows us to see how these conditions (pay gaps, antitrans violence, institutional erasure) are constitutive of and reproduce gender as an abstraction. The performance takes place in a blacked-out room with the performer, a photographer, the audience, and a 15-hundred-pound block of clay present. Cassils uses their training as a boxer to climb onto and beat the clay, “molding a form” (Cassils n.d.). They present the body as simultaneously material and immaterial, both present and absent.

The performance is in one sense tied to the material. The skin of Cassils’s body glows with sweat, their muscles and sinew tense and bulge as they make repeated and forceful contact with the clay. In the bright flash of the camera, their face flushes pink; the viewer is made aware of the blood beneath their skin as their expression contorts from physical strain. The clay reinforces this attentiveness to materiality: a huge and heavy block of malleable matter that is roughly the height of the artist’s body. The block of clay illuminates what transgender embodiment is for Cassils: not “about a crossing from one sex to another” but a “continual becoming” (Cassils n.d.). The performance also, however, stages a difference between the clay and Cassils’s body.

Through the performance’s staging of absence and presence, Cassils’s body simultaneously appears somehow beyond or out of sync with its own (and the clay’s) materiality. Taking place in a pitch-black room, the artist explains, “I am blind, as is the audience, as is the photographer” (Cassils

11. *Becoming an Image* (2012–present) has been performed worldwide at events including Edgy Women Festival, Montreal in 2013; SPILL Festival, London in 2013; Incendiary, Netherlands in 2015; and Perth International Performance Festival in 2019.

12. As Steinbock suggests, the performance is about “survivors and loss in archives as well as in the wider trans* community” (2014:261).

n.d.). The momentary camera flashes are the only source of light. These short bursts of light give the spectators a “glimpse at the suspended photographs”—as Cassils explains, the performance can only be witnessed through the “act of photographing” (Cassils n.d.). The bright flashes of the camera light offer split seconds of visibility, illuminating Cassils’s body and the audience lining the walls of the room. Here, rather than glass, it is the interplay between light and darkness that figures the tension between obfuscation and appearance that characterizes abstraction.

The flashes leave a visual imprint of Cassils’s body in the minds of the spectators even as Cassils changes position in darkness. The image of Cassils and the clay is burned onto the retina of the viewer: the scene is witnessed as a series of “afterimages” while Cassils’s body moves elsewhere. What the spectators see, therefore, are spectral images of Cassils pummeling the clay. Their body appears in its absence, held momentarily in place while the artist moves away.¹³ Cassils undoes the “spectral objectivity” of capitalist abstractions: they make their body, a producer/reproducer of value and as such a capitalist artifact, spectral to the viewer, destabilizing its natural, material objectivity. The dialectic of absence and presence that plays out in Mendieta’s work in the interplay of the glass and her body, and in *Cyclic* where the different artists appear and disappear in the darkness of the Lung, here takes place through the flashes of the camera and the afterimages of Cassils’s fast-moving body.

This interplay of absence and presence extends beyond the live event. Cassils exhibits the molded, beaten clay block as a sculpture (“clay bash”) after live performances. Their body is transformed by and transforms the clay, its presence felt through the imprints of their hands, fists, feet, and legs in the dense substance. This material imprint on the clay mirrors the visual imprint upon the mind of the viewer as an effect of the camera flash. At some gallery exhibits, a sound installation accompanies “clay bash”; *Ghost* (2013) is an audio recording of the artist pounding the block. In this exhibit, Cassils’s laboring body is made present through the sounds of their grunts, gasps, and pulse-beat (Cassils n.d.). The artist’s body is experienced even though it is not materially in the room.

In this intensely athletic, site-specific performance, and in the related installations that accompany it, Cassils stages their body through an interplay of presence and absence. (It is present—in the burned afterimage on the retina of the viewer, or in the recording of breath and heartbeat; but it is also absent—Cassils’s body has shifted its location in the darkness, or is not physically there in the exhibit of “clay bash” and *Ghost*.) This staging conveys an interplay between concrete materialities and abstract forces that evokes the determining movement of value, an abstraction, on concrete social relations. Through playing with sight and obfuscation, with presence, absence, and proximation, Cassils conveys a felt sense of the dialectic between the particularities of the material body and the totality of the capitalist system.

In the context of the ONE Archives, this dialectic is tethered to histories of queer and transgender struggle against violence and erasure. The body as artifact is inseparable from the direct and indirect forms of domination that the archive documents, and the erasure of transgender histories from this archive. Cassils’s bodily transformation is not only or exclusively material but is bound up in the history of the production of gender as a specific, and transforming, effect of capitalist development: they reveal the body as artifact to be one of history’s effects rather than preconditions.¹⁴

In Mendieta’s *Untitled*, the artist “imprints” her body with a sheet of plexiglass, stretching and molding the body’s malleable form out of shape. In *Pressed*, while Cassils’s interaction with the glass is more forceful, their contact with it never changes its shape or form. In *Becoming an Image*,

13. Cassils describes the photographer’s flash as “burning” the image of the “spectacle [...] into the viewer’s retina” (n.d.). Getsy recounts how the flash “leav[es] viewers with retinal burn” (2018); and for Amelia Jones the audience “apprehend[s]” Cassils’s “laboring body” a split-second late, “as afterimages burned into our retinas” (2015:18).

14. Marx describes the individual as an “effect” of history ([1939] 1993:83).



Figure 4. Cassils, *Becoming An Image Performance Still No. 4*. ONE National Archives, *Transactivations*, Los Angeles, 2012. c-print face mounted to Plexiglas, 24 x 36 in. (Photo by Cassils with Eric Charles; courtesy of Cassils)

this process is reversed: the artist's body imprints upon the clay block, which the artist molds and shapes. The clay (known as "Walter Elias Disney" [WED] clay because it is commonly used in the film industry for stop-motion animation and for making facial sculptures) is a dense material that cannot be fired. This means that the molded clay form, unless cast in another material, will erode over time (Getsy 2015:273). The clay's dense presence is time-bound. Cassils's body, which they imprint upon it, is also time-bound; it is also something that has been molded into form through the effort of the artist. The similarity here, between the matter of the clay and of Cassils's body, emphasizes a processual transformation that takes place through history. The performance reverses the imprinting process that we see in Mendieta's *Untitled*. Such a reversal indicates a reciprocal relationship between matter and abstraction: gender is an abstraction that concretely determines the body, but this relation is not fixed or one-directional, abstractions (like gender, and value) emerge through historically and materially situated social relations.

Cassils is the instrument of aesthetic production as they mold the clay block, and they are simultaneously the instrument of the production of their own masculinized body, which they have constructed through intensive physical training. While Cassils pummels the clay, molding and shaping the inanimate matter, their physical exertion signals the labor of producing the gendered body. For Fintan Walsh, Cassils's performance explores the work of "bodily fashioning," revealing corporeal transformation as an "artistic and athletic enterprise" (2020:709). Cassils's performance enacts the processual nature of gender: rather than the material body providing positive identification of a fixed and natural category, the body's matter is something transformed and transformable.

In the Oakland Museum exhibition, *Becoming an Image* is situated in relation to specifically colonial legacies of gender enforcement that emphasize gender's function for capital as an instrument of accumulation. The performance documents are staged in a room set behind a screen showing *Never Not Been a Part of Me* (Oakland Museum of California 2019), which explores the gender fluidity of

two-spirit and third-gender indigenous people today.¹⁵ The film highlights the ways in which lives continue to be lived outside of the “colonial/modern gender system” in defiance of historic and ongoing gender regulation (Lugones 2007). The exhibition displays historical records that document how binary gender and heterosexual norms were violently imposed on indigenous peoples in California by Spanish Catholic missionaries from the 18th century onwards, with medical records showing how castration and eugenics laws and policies were implemented as late as the 20th century to restrict reproductive freedom. The exhibition demonstrates how colonial violence underpins the development and regulation of gender and sexuality, and that these practices underpinned the expansion of capitalism in the “New World.”

While Cassils’s relation to these histories is complex: they are a beneficiary of settler colonialism (Cassils is white, was born in Canada, and now lives in the US), the artist’s transformation of their own body, their production of a masculinized form, reveals gender’s material contingency. Their muscular, sweating, laboring body distorts the heterosexual, cisgender norm that constitutes capitalism’s naturalized gender ideal (see Walsh 2020:712). Positioned in relation to these historic (and ongoing) colonial processes of primitive accumulation (the violent dispossession of people from the means of reproducing themselves), Cassils’s forceful encounter with the clay in *Becoming an Image* is steeped in the history not only of LGBTQ struggle, but of the very emergence and enforcement of the gender binary as a mechanism of social control underpinning the accumulation of surplus-value.

This framework centers the material history of the development of gender *as* abstraction. Attending to abstraction draws out how Mendieta’s articulation of the mutual contingency of gender and race, which plays out across the body and across wider social and political contexts and relates to her own material experiences of sexism and racism as a Cuban immigrant in the US, situates her work in relation to the historical interweaving of gender and capital.

Violence and Recuperation

In the middle of the room exhibiting *Becoming an Image* at the Oakland Museum sits a huge lump of bronze. Encouraging us to touch the sculpture, a gallery assistant explains that Cassils is keen for the public to connect physically with the work. Looking closely, I see—and can touch—Cassils’s finger- and handprints from the clay that is now solidified into hard shining bronze. I see the imprint of their fists and knees forcing the material inward. Unlike the “clay bash” that erodes over time, this bronze monument is durable. The sculpture is called *The Resilience of the 20%* (2012), referring to the 20% increase in the number of murders of transgender people worldwide in 2012 that was part of Cassils’s motivation for making the performance.

Cassils’s performance thus clarifies what is at stake in the line of inquiry I raise here. Capitalist abstractions have violent and often deadly repercussions. Concrete and abstract are cleaved together ruthlessly and brutally, and this force permeates *Becoming an Image*. Cassils’s exertive interaction with the clay block is imbued with violence, in ways reminiscent of Mendieta’s *Untitled*. The distortions of capitalism’s appropriation and instrumentalization of gendered difference, which are carried out through direct and indirect forms of domination, are held in Cassils’s assault on the clay. The link, here, with the violence tracing Mendieta’s performances, emphasizes how physical, social, and epistemic distortions are shared methods of the regulation and disciplining of different gendered and racialized groups, and as such of capitalism’s strategies of differentiation. In bringing together the abstract and the concrete, Mendieta and Cassils make the distortions of the indirect compulsions that “mold” gendered forms and behaviors transparent.

15. “Two-spirit” is an umbrella term used by some North American indigenous communities to describe a person who has a masculine and a feminine spirit. The term can encompass spiritual, sexual, gender, and other identities and experiences.

For Walsh, the bright light that pierces the eyes of the spectators during Cassils's *Becoming an Image* “communicate[s] a sense of the out-of-sight, often proximate violence enacted on queer bodies” (2020:710). The violence of the visual, of the logics that position identity as something that might be gleaned or understood just by looking, is signaled by the brightness of the flashes that burn and mark the retina. Homophobic, transphobic, and other forms of anti-queer violence are effects of and reproduce a system that both produces and relies upon gender as a means of making groups differentially valued—socially and economically. Direct violence and the threat of it sit alongside the indirect compulsions—naturalizing and normalizing tendencies—that undergird capitalism's heterosexual gender binary.

In *Becoming an Image*, Cassils's body is constrained by abstractions but is also in a process of transformation. The body's material promise of wholeness or completion is constantly deferred. The body's materiality is made suspect in ways that generate the speculative possibility of embodiment beyond artifactuality, and as such in excess of capital's distortions.

Untitled, *Pressed*, and *Becoming an Image* differently reveal and resist capitalism's naturalization of gender, staging the body as a constitutive relationship between concrete and abstract. By denaturalizing the gendered body, they reveal that body to be imbricated with capitalism's forward motion, where gendered and racialized hierarchies function as a required auxiliary of capital accumulation. The ongoing imbrication of gender with value relies in part on the obfuscation of this relation, and any attempts to resist oppressive gendered dynamics that do not reckon with it further obscures gender's relationship to capital.

Mendieta and Cassils engage with sensory and aesthetic experiences of the body's imbrication with capital, and as such, of the body as artifact. In so doing, these artists stage “the body” as a possible site of anticapitalist struggle: as historically produced and dominated by capitalism's drives but (and because of this) as a possible site of antagonism to them.

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