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A Tactical History of World-Building(s): IV Castellanos's *Homage to an Activist Tripod*

Abstract: This paper tests theoretical tools developed to frame social construction, historicization, and speech-action as performance on IV Castellanos's social sculpture *Homage to an Activist Tripod*. How can one say that a temporary, collective, non-representation yet intentional collective performance matters to and as 'world history'? What constructive agencies do different theoretical frameworks provide performance-as-art and other Othered and otherwise 'non-productive' world-building practices? Written from the perspective of a participant in the performance, which paid homage to water and land protectors, the structure of this paper builds analogies between theorization and task-based performance, between theoretical spaces and political action, demanding structural integrity and ethical coherence within and between constructivities.

Keywords: social sculpture; queer theory; social construction; historicization; world history.

As participants and witnesses arrive at 104 Meserole street in Brooklyn (Lenapehoking), many of us hold out our palms and, looking up into the low gray clouds, say something like "is it starting to rain?" The performance will happen outside, across the wide sidewalk and part of the street, on a Saturday evening. Against the open doors of the performance space, a miter saw and drills stand ready alongside prepared wooden frames, a box of screws, 2X4's, a container of orange earplugs and a pack of workman's gloves. These tools and materials are carefully arranged, a pre-performance installation also incorporating two posters, *Land Back* and *Water is Life*, and the phrases *Black Lives Matter* and *Back the Black and Brown* written directly on the wall in black paint. The posters and painted phrases mark the political affiliations of this site and align what will happen here with historic and contemporary liberation movements. IV Castellanos initiated this performance two weeks beforehand with an invitation that simply read: "public performance on the sidewalk. Please come and help me build a structure." They then sent out text messages earlier in the week, reminding us that this performance would occur that Saturday. The night before the performance they posted a video on social media of salvaging the wood and a time-lapse video of them preparing the wooden frames and setting up the installation outside. Temporal frames, brackets, assemblages, and 'building materials,' across

physical, ideological, social, and conceptual types, are accumulated to prefigure an imminent performance situation as both a ‘break’ from ongoing historic movements against colonialism, cisheteropatriarchy, and white supremacy, and as processes of constructing time-spaces that somehow re-orient or reconfigure these constructed apparatuses and real conditions from within them.

Proceeding from Foucault’s immensely influential articulations of how power produces “reality [...] domains of objects, and rituals of truth”¹, and decades after the initial rise of social construction theory across disciplines,² that ‘world history’ is both ‘constructed’ and ‘produced by power’ is often assumed. While ‘History’, (capital ‘H’) as any single, dominant narrative or standard story, is seen to be produced by power, it is also common to recognize that there are many other competing histories and tales. “It cannot exactly be news to historians that there are many kinds of history, emerging from different sorts of producers, within disparate specialized languages, for various ends” wrote Ann-Louise Shapiro in 1997.³ Further, senses that multiple histories are ‘constructed’ through storytelling and collective memory,⁴ through the building of spatial markers (such as monuments⁵), and across mnemonic and institutional practices⁶ (from oral traditions through museums) are also accompanied by the idea that the *ways* in which histories are constructed through senses of time and space,⁷ involve diverse *forms* of narrative, logic, representation, and valuation.⁸ “History may be written by the victor”⁹ not only because he hoards tools and resources, casts his heroes in iron, and hangs his trophies on the walls of buildings erected on his property, but also because his forms of reason, consciousness, and evaluation suppose themselves determining what and who is real, good, right, and reasonable. Multiple histories, as well as ways of constructing histories, are thus seen competing to represent (the) pasts and (the) people in terms of both forms and contents. Within these now-dominant views of how power produces both histories and ‘history itself’, small-scale actions such as performance art

¹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1991), 194.

² See Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Doubleday, 1966); Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method: Outline of an Anarchistic Theory of Knowledge* (London: NLB, 1975).

³ Ann-Louise Shapiro “Whose (Which) History is it Anyway?” *History and Theory* 4, 36 (1997): 3.

⁴ Eviatar Zerubavel, *Time Maps: Collective Memory and the Social Shape of the Past* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 13.

⁵ Kenneth E. Foote and Maoz Azaryahu, “Toward a geography of memory: geographical dimensions of public memory and commemoration,” *Journal of Political and Military Sociology* 35 (2007): 125–44

⁶ Jeffrey K. Olick and Joyce Robbins, “Social Memory Studies: From ‘Collective Memory’ to the Historical Sociology of Mnemonic Practices,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 24 (1998): 105–140.

⁷ Charles Mills, “The chronopolitics of racial time,” *Time & Society* (2020): 297–317; Judith Butler “Sexual politics, torture, and secular time,” *The British Journal of Sociology* 1, 59 (2008): 1–23.

⁸ Katherine McKittrick cites Édouard Glissant regarding how “History (colonial) narratively erases black history (nonhistory),” in *Dear Science and Other Stories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020): 187; see also Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, trans. J. Michael Dash (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989), 61–65.

⁹ For debate on attributions of this phrase, see <https://slate.com/culture/2019/11/history-is-written-by-the-victors-quote-origin.html>, acc. on April 10, 2023.

on the street that pays homage to water protector blockades, or a group of elders telling stories from the perspectives of their ancestors, may seem quite futile in terms of restructuring iniquitous power paradigms. If power produces history by winning at competitions between representations, and power also produces the forms of representation seen to be most historic, then how can History ever be constructed by or on behalf of those who are not already empowered within and by it?

Sally Haslanger traces “social constructivism” itself as a philosophical approach genealogically through Marxist theory, specifically through epistemic resistances to the construction of truth by power, and through the concept of ideology as a “cultural *technē* gone wrong.” Writes Haslanger:

The concept of ideology is employed in different ways within different traditions. On my view, a cultural *technē* is a set of social meanings – including concepts, scripts, background assumptions (‘analytic’ truths), inferential patterns, salient metaphors, metonyms, conceptual oppositions, and (broadly speaking) grammar – that provides tools for interpreting and responding to each other and the world around us.¹⁰

Haslanger understands “cultural *technē*” to involve concepts as *tools* used to construct: “a cultural *technē* or ideology is when you have the social meanings that let you interpret what something *is* [...] cultural *technē* gives us the means for interpreting that then shapes our ways of seeing and thinking and our desires and then guides our behaviour.”¹¹ Through Haslanger’s lens, “history” can be framed as part of cultural *technē* or ideology about time, persons, and events that has “gone wrong” in that it fails to accurately represent the past of anyone but “overdetermined Man”¹². Cornel West, in discussing the construction of the “modern conception of racism” similarly describes how “the controlling metaphors, notions, categories, and norms that shape the predominant conceptions of truth and knowledge in the modern West” have constructed aesthetic and social value (and the lack thereof) and thus the concept of “white supremacy” through “a kind of free play of discursive powers which produce and prohibit, develop and delimit the legitimacy and intelligibility of certain ideas within a discursive space circumscribed by the attractiveness of classical antiquity.”¹³ Haslanger and West are both concerned with the construction of white

¹⁰ Sally Haslanger, “Going On, Not in the Same Way,” in *Conceptual Engineering and Conceptual Ethics*, ed. Alexis Burgess, Herman Cappelen, and David Plunkett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 232.

¹¹ Tanvi Punja, “Haslanger Discusses the Social Domain, Cultural *Technē* and Injustice February 11, 2020,” on Haslanger’s Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) speech for the Wesleyan Philosophy Department’s fifth annual Social Justice Lecture, “But What Can We Do?... Ideology, Power, and Agency,” online: <http://wesleyanargus.com/2020/02/11/haslanger-discusses-the-social-domain-cultural-technē-and-injustice/#>, acc. on April 10, 2023. See also Sally Haslanger, *Resisting Reality: Social Construction and Social Critique* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

¹² Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, after Man, Its Overrepresentation-An Argument,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, 3 (2003): 257–337.

¹³ Cornel West, “A Genealogy of Modern Racism,” in *Race Critical Theories: Text and Context*, ed. Philomena Essed and David Theo Goldber (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2002), 93.

supremacy and binary gender, which are concepts about the classification, value, and hegemonic ordering of (in)human kinds. ‘History’ on the other hand is a concept about the classification, value, and hegemonic ordering of events, experiences, memories, and, most stickily, *time*. Through theories of “cultural technē” and “discursive space, forms and contents of history”, and “time” may be seen constructed as concepts through discursive apparatuses (e.g., “cultural technē/ideology, “discursive powers/space”) constituted by and producing material artefacts (e.g., metaphors, meanings, agents...). Moreover, while such “social constructivism” can be seen as a way of simply adding more material elements to a central pile in attempts to build more ‘holistic’ or complete historical and categorical narratives, for theorists such as Haslanger and West, social construction theory is adopted due to its implications for ameliorative and reparative social justice movements. As Ron Mallon rather blandly summarizes,

Some theorists defend constructionist views because they believe that they more adequately explain the phenomena than competing views. But many constructionists have more explicitly political or social aims. For this latter group of theorists, revealing the contingency of a thing on our culture or decisions suggests that we might alter that thing through future social choices. It also may indicate our responsibility to do so if the thing in question is unjust.¹⁴

‘History’, as seen to be constructed by and on behalf of power, is intrinsically an ‘unjust’ construction, especially in its representational formations.¹⁵ ‘Time’ as ‘a thing in question’, may also be seen as unjust representational construction; Charles Mills describes how the “Euro-chronometer” hierarchizes certain representations and values over others. Mills tracks of “chronopolitics” of how “forms” of time are constructed to privilege (white) Europeans and their histories. Thus, the question for social construction theories involved in social justice projects becomes, may ‘we’ alter that ‘thing’, that is, *a construct* of ‘history’ (or ‘time’) through ‘social choices’?

I am not expecting to answer this massive and complex question here. Rather, I would like to perform a much more modest inquiry into the social construction of ‘histories’ as conceptualized through the scale of time as it is experienced during a tactical activities framed as ‘performance art’. Most simply, I am asking, what does it mean to say a *particular collective action*, such as *Homage to an Activist Tripod*, a social performance of art made through a specific assembly of persons, ‘constructs a concept of world history’?¹⁶ I am discussing a specific performance as a case study in order to perform a practical investigation into 1) if (and if so, how) localized, deliberate social

¹⁴ Ron Mallon, “A Field Guide to Social Construction,” in *Philosophy Compass* 2, 1 (2007): 94, see also Ian Hacking, *The Social Construction of What?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 1–9.

¹⁵ See bell hooks, *Black Looks Race and Representation* (London: Routledge, 2015).

¹⁶ This is quite a different question from asking how a performance ‘makes history’, which I would suggest might involve more investigation of spectatorship, popularity, and epistemic recognition. Here, I am specifically discussing the social construction of ‘concepts of history’ through a specific performance.

performance of art may be seen as socially constructive – at least of itself, and/or perhaps only for those present – in and through ‘time,’ 2) if (and if so, how) a social performance process may be seen constructing concepts in ways that might somehow be more ‘just,’ perhaps through orientation around the senses of justice, care, value, and survivability held and carried by performers present, and 3) if (and if so, how) constructive elements of form and content, or ‘concept’ and ‘material,’ including forms of representation as well as assembly as matters of cultural techē and discursive space, may be theorized in and as social performance as art.

Castellanos’s work often involves queer people, trans and cis women, non-binary people, and trans men performing building processes. They assemble those of us identified as queers and not as cis men, usually though not exclusively, due to affective social relations (that is, we are already ‘in community’). Many of Castellanos’s collaborators are also Native, Black, and/or Indigenous,¹⁷ persons aligned with globally disempowered majorities, for the same reasons. Yet, the performance I am discussing does not claim to represent the ideas, needs, or values of any particular identity group, even while the form of the performance is constituted by the needs and desires of the persons constructing¹⁸ it. The assembly itself, as a social embodiment, is formed through enaction of a building process, through acts of ‘shared speech,’ acts of *homage*, that articulate intersections between social communication tactics and embodied processes of individuals. Against what she calls the “hidden essentialism” of post-structuralist discourse on the production of histories and their subjects, Gayatri Spivak focuses on speech acts that historicize self and consciousness, writing that in order for the “subaltern” to “speak,” we must ask “With what voice-consciousness can [the subaltern] speak?”¹⁹ For Spivak, “voice-consciousness” is how forms of expression, self-reflection, reception, and conceptualization are in-forming “micropolitical”²⁰ persons and groups through their own consciousness of themselves and what matters to them.²¹ Like truth-power “matrices” theorized through the discourse of social construction, “voice-consciousness” is a sort of apparatus that materializes, enunciates,

¹⁷ This latter is a complex claim to make in a single sentence; collaborators of Castellanos have involved members of many different first peoples, Native and Indigenous groups, and First Nations.

¹⁸ I am about to begin blending concrete senses of ‘construction,’ as of a house, with the use of the term as part of social construction theory. Please bear with me in good faith that these poetic convergences are intentionally performed towards conceptually proliferation and diversity of potential interpretation of meaning.

¹⁹ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea*, ed. Rosalind Morris, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 27.

²⁰ See Ritu Birla on Spivak, “Postcolonial Studies: Now That’s History,” in *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea*, ed. Rosalind Morris (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 90; see also Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe on the “microlitical,” in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso Books, 1985).

²¹ Spivak uses this term to investigate how she as a theorist, or any “intellectual,” can seek to grasp the “voices” of the hill women of Sirmur in her study. “Voice-consciousness” is the ways in which her subject(s) elide dominant forms of signification and representation, if only within their own consciousness of their own speech. Writes Spivak: “One never encounters the testimony of the women’s voice consciousness. Such a testimony would not be ideology-transcendent or ‘fully’ subjective, of course, but it would constitute the ingredients for producing a countersentence.” Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, 50.

and makes matter(s), but it is *scaled* differently; “voice-consciousness” is by definition a form of speech shared locating a “marginalized” group, and is a way of formulating speech that constructs “subalternity”.²² Spivak helps us recognize through this term that while the “S/subject of the West”²³ materializes a history that co-constructs or (re)produces his power through acts of genocide, enslavement, and other control of bodies, and that he produces himself and is produced as the empowered S/subject of history through and in his own image and imagination, his *forms of consciousness and formations of speech* (and vice-versa) are not the only possible constructivities. Sylvia Wynter marks the importance of this recognition in much less Derridean language, identifying how there is “always something else besides the dominant cultural logic going on.”²⁴

Many decolonial thinkers see the “something else” in terms of both “logics” and “forms of *consciousness*”²⁵, investigating how mentalities, meanings, and senses of reality are imbricated with material power paradigms and the sensory, affective states of bodies. When theorizing from within social construction theory, any social embodiment, any assembly, collective, or ‘we’, is seen to be ‘resulting’ as Laclau puts it, “from an indissociable articulation between signifying and affective elements”²⁶, becoming a ‘social body’ or ‘body politic’ though its own forms of consciousness and speech. Thus, ‘social choice’ (of the type that social justice-oriented social construction theories suggest may be possible) appears not as a mode of power but as a form of consciousness that constructs itself through particular social attentions, assemblies, and speech acts.

Homage to an Activist Tripod enables the more expanded and complex senses of social construction that I have been attempting to discuss largely through its alternation of representational schemas. In relationship with social construction theory, decolonial thought, and what we may generally call ‘the performative turn’, *representation* emerges as both a target of deconstruction²⁷ and as a description of creative agency. Contempo-

²² It is important to note that “subaltern” is not, for Spivak, a description of particular persons but a heterogeneous decolonized space, a locale from which acts of speech are both constative and coordinated. None of the participants in this performance should be described as ‘subaltern’, not only because of our more ‘central’ (including ‘resistant’) cultural positions in relation to colonial histories, but also because ‘subaltern’ should not be used as an adjective to describe persons.

²³ “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, 24.

²⁴ David Scott, “The Re-enchantment of Humanism: An Interview with Sylvia Wynter,” *Small Axe* 8 (2000): 164. Citation borrowed from Katherine McKittrick, *Dear Science and other stories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 137.

²⁵ See Fernando Coronil on “Occidental Representational Modalities,” in “Beyond Occidentalism: Towards Nonimperial Geohistoric Categories,” *Cultural Anthropology* 1, 11 (1996): 52; see also Istvan Meszaros on relationships between social structure and forms of consciousness in *Social Structure and Forms of Consciousness: The Social Determination of Method, Vol I* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2010).

²⁶ Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso Books, 2005), 111.

²⁷ See Jean-François Lyotard, for example, on the political and historic implications of art that embodies the ‘figural’ through separation of *aesthesis* from ‘representation’ and the kind of ‘discourse’ determining the ‘human’ from the ‘inhuman’, *Discourse, Figure*, trans. Antony Hudek and Mary Lydon (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971).

rary theories of performativity have emerged, as Janelle Reinelt summarizes, “as part of an ongoing poststructuralist critique of agency, subjectivity, language, and law.[...] The political stakes in this work have to do with the recovery of possibilities for agency.”²⁸ “Agency” here is a synonym for “social choice”, theorizing the capacities of persons and groups to dismantle, re-form, and potentially create anew some structures, systems, concepts, norms, and other elements of ideological matrices which are currently seen as immiserating, false, and/or unjust. Here, despite decades of abstract, conceptual, and body-based art, representations of a ‘marginalized subject’ or of ‘alternative perspectives’ reemerges as a clear agentic capacity and way of participating in competitive determinations of whose and which histories will be seen and told. Regarding such capacities for performance of art, Peggy Phelan writes, “Each representation relies on and reproduces a specific logic of the real.”²⁹ Through this sense, art’s relationship with history is ‘participatory’; it presents (weakly) competitive expressions of identified persons and groups, which may or may not then be adopted as ‘Historic’, and/or serve to alter or re-direct dominant historic narratives.

In resistance to the resurgence of representational art which pitches its representations of identified individuals into competition, Castellanos calls their work ‘abstract’. They seek to remove ‘signifying’ elements from their processes and forms. They describe how they make their work by feelingly by absorbing embodied experiences (such as, for the past few weeks leading up to this performance, travelling with water protectors between protests) and then situating material conditions that seem to ‘process’ these in relation with other people.³⁰ This work is not *about* Line 3, Black Lives Matter, Land Back, or the use of structures to block roads as part of water protection protests; it does not *represent* these as ‘matters of history’ or demand that representations of involved persons or events should matter to History. However, Castellanos’s work is not totally devoid of semiotic elements, and it seems to me impossible to completely scrub any bodies or objects of preexisting significance. In *Homage to an Activist Tripod* there is also the sign saying *Black Lives Matter*, which can be discussed a perlocutionary speech act, posted to *make it so*, to directly materialize “Black Lives” as matter(ing).³¹ Two-by-fours, made of pine and marked with a barcode sticker, do not seem to symbolize anything in particular, but they *could be read as* dragging in some representations of histories of lumber industries, Euro-colonial measurement systems and biocidal deforestation, ‘histories’ which would have to be interpreted by consciousness, or located by readings into their meanings as materials. As a witness,

²⁸ Janelle Reinelt, “The Politics of Discourse: Performativity Meets Theatricality,” *SubStance* 31, 2/3, 98/99 (2002): 203.

²⁹ Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993), 2.

³⁰ Conversations with the artist, on the day of this performance and over the course of the past decade or so.

³¹ Citing Marilyn Strathern, Donna Haraway famously declares “It matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what descriptions describe descriptions, what ties tie ties. It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories.” Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Cthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 12. Coordinating the idealist ontologies of Haraway within this paper is beyond its scope, however through this footnote I would like to nod to their pertinence.

theorist, critic, or art historian, I could break some of what I see down into semiotic, representational units. Yet, to assign representational functions to this performance would also be to colonize and impose my own sense of ‘logic’ and ‘reason.’ This performance matters to me, but its processes of materialization are diffractive and decentralized and emerge consciously/conscientiously built as such, around political senses of intersectionality and horizontality as part of the ‘justice’ that may be sought by ameliorative projects like those likewise served by Haslanger and West’s theories. This essay must become part of this performance’s assemblage too, weaving in and out of sense alongside ‘the performance’ as it fails to become a representational, single, categorical object of study.³² My inquiry must transform and become distinct from notions of ‘construction of history’ as processes of competing representations, asking instead, *how* might processes that conceive of history be conscious and conscientious? Do constructive processes practice or materialize forms of *conscience*? While Phelan’s view itself relies heavily on Western representational forms of consciousness (including direct resistances to them ‘from within’), I must begin from another site in search of ways of theorizing *non-representational* acts of conceptualization and speech, especially those performed *intentionally*, in order to produce histories and forms of historic consciousness around the value(s)³³ of ‘Other’ located enunciators and their/our consciousness/consciences.

The first ‘construction’ process performed by Castellanos’s work is that of assembly, which in itself may be theorized through Spivak’s “voice-consciousness”, rather than around representative elements of identity, subjecthood, and agency offered up by concepts of History as a competitive building process. Further, forms of consciousness themselves are built and ‘spoken’ through processes such as those of *homage*, adapting to and materialized by the materials at hand, which carry raw properties and qualities (e.g., hardness, length, substance of constitution), rather than solely semiotic properties and qualities (e.g., significance, meaning, symbolic power). Thus, I do not believe it is fair to describe this performance as ‘reproducing a logic of the real’ in Phelan’s sense.³⁴ *Homage to an Activist Tripod* is processual, conceptualizing itself, its social formation, and its voice-consciousness through *building processes*. By building processes I mean using power tools and wood or other materials to make something, usually a structure that is then activated. By building processes, however, I also mean the *building of processes* which may themselves be seen as self-constructive in Spivak’s sense of “voice-consciousness”, as semi-autonomous ways of communicating that may not be ‘representative’ or ‘representational’ because they do not speak in the *ways* demanded by concepts and other material “cultural technē” and “discursive spaces” of history.

³² Citing Foucault, Spivak describes how “the rise of industrial capitalism is made possible by a new form of power that is neither ideological nor repressive. This form of power does not negate its targets, either through ideational distortion or physical violence, but actually positively shapes and produces its objects through discourses of truth.” Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” 184.

³³ In both the economic sense of ‘the value of X’ and in terms of values held and carried in terms of ethics, perspectives, forms of consciousness.

³⁴ Phelan’s theory is already attempting to move beyond the *narrative* functions of ‘theatre’ to discuss ‘performance art’ as a visual medium that represents its own forms and logics.

Spivak writes that “Foucault is correct in suggesting that ‘to make visible the unseen can also mean a change of level, addressing oneself to a layer of material which had hitherto had no pertinence for history and which had not been recognized as having any moral, aesthetic or historical value’”³⁵ then discusses how “Two senses of representation are being run together: representation as “speaking for”, as in politics, and representation as “re-presentation”, as in art or philosophy. It is in the ‘irreducible discontinuity’ between these two senses – as well as between the ‘same’ words “consciousness and conscience (both *conscience* in French)” that Spivak sees how “The critique of ideological subject-constitution within state formations and systems of political economy can now be effaced, as can the active theoretical practice of the ‘transformation of consciousness.’”³⁶ My inquiry here begins (again) by approaching history as a *concept*, as a matter of ‘consciousness’ and ‘conscience’, asking (again) if the concept of history may be constructed through small-scale collective actions, (hitherto) impertinent ‘layers of material’ which ‘speak’ in particular manners – specifically through collection performance as art – in ways that at least fail to representatively reproduce power paradigms and refuse to compete.

History ‘itself’ as something already seen to be ‘written’, can be much more easily understood as constructed, as a sorted or composed array of events, an assemblage of time periods, persons, and processes, narrated in ways that serve those doing the sorting or composing. History ‘itself’ may be seen in terms of representational assemblage, as *constructed* through social relations, power paradigms, and practical representative actions (such as writing books, teaching a 5th grade history class, publicly guillotining nobility) performed by persons and groups who are themselves produced, conditioned, and controlled by power paradigms. On the other hand, ‘concepts of history’, whether described as metanarratives of modernity³⁷ or as personal scores kept by one’s own body,³⁸ are rather more difficult to theorize. What, in any case, is a ‘concept of history’, and how do concepts figure into, figure out, and configure social constructivities?

In order to even formulate such questions, I need to distinguish between ‘a social construct’ as some *thing*, as an *artifact*, and ‘social construction’ as a *process*, which is performed and itself performs. Sally Haslanger falls down in the former camp. She writes that social constructions (such as ‘wife’ in her discussion) may be generally described as ‘artifacts’. Artifacts are of all different types and are ‘factualized’ through many different causal and constitutive processes involving different modes of human intention and design.³⁹ Through this view, ‘performance art’ is a good example of ‘a social construct. So is ‘time’. Both involve ‘history’, as a conceptual tool within the cultural technē of their production. Without ‘art history’ as a construct, some-thing

³⁵ Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” 26–27.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 28.

³⁷ See Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984).

³⁸ See Bessel A Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York, New York: Penguin Books, 2015).

³⁹ Sally Haslanger, “Ontology and Social Construction,” *Philosophical Topics* 23, 2 (1995): 97–98.

called ‘performance art’ loses its contextualization as emergent from ritual, Viennese Actionism, fluxus, and various discursive descriptions. And, on the other side of the feedback loop,⁴⁰ the conceptual artifact ‘performance art history’, the shape of a historical trajectory for certain modes and forms of art, is constructed through and by particular material processes framed and framing themselves as ‘performance art’. Haslanger’s is a more agentic view of social construction, involving persons in modes of social *production*. This allows her theory more of a relationship with Marxist theories of modes of production, class struggle, and labor systems. Causal and constitutive processes themselves however are the focus of social construction theories like those of Judith Butler, whose work frames ‘gender’ not as a kind of artifact *produced* through modes of intentional and compulsory performativity but rather as co-constructive *apparatus* (what they call a “matrix”⁴¹) through which performances are (dis)embodied.⁴² Butler shows how the workings of power extend through both material and conceptual dimensions of sex and sexuality. Butler’s sense of “construction” is neither a “divine performative”, a “godlike agency which not only causes but composes everything which is its object”, nor the work of a “voluntarist subject” who designs their own gender (for example) through “an instrumental action.”⁴³ Rather, for Butler, social construction is “the matrix through which all willing first becomes possible, its enabling cultural condition.” Social construction, for Butler, is a non-inhabited spatial-temporal “matrix” that “is prior to the emergence of the ‘human.’”⁴⁴

The difference between Haslanger’s “cultural technē” and Butler’s “matrix” is *when* and *how* discursively productive and constructive apparatusi are seen as interactive with embodied agents. For Haslanger (and for West, perhaps even more so), *acts* of describing, envisioning, valuing, judging, and representing are involved in the production of concepts and constructs as artifacts. Agents do invent and thus may perhaps “(re)design” or “fail to (re)produce” immiserating constructs.⁴⁵ For Butler, on the other hand, constructivities are always enabled or disabled *already* and *in every moment*; there is no other (pre-historical or other ideal) site or discursive space from which science, theory, or theatre as the embodied activity of living agents can precede, (or otherwise transcend or subscend) “the matrix”; a “matrix” it is not an artifact and neither are ‘we’, rather all facts are constructed through matrixed lines of power and mentality. My view – influenced by the practices and positions of process-based performance art as well as by philosophy – is a synthesis of Haslanger and Butler’s. I

⁴⁰ See Ian Hacking, “The looping effects of human kinds,” in *Causal cognition: A multidisciplinary debate*, ed. D. Sperber, D. Premack, & A. J. Premack (Oxford: Clarendon Press/Oxford University Press, 1995), 351–94.

⁴¹ See again Foucault and the “truth-power matrix,” see also Anibal Quijano on the lines of “the colonial matrix” or “coloniality of power”. Anibal Quijano, “Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America,” *Nepantla: Views from South* 3, 1 (2000): 533–80.

⁴² Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (London: Routledge, 1993), xvi.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, xvii.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, xvii.

⁴⁵ In Haslanger’s area of philosophy (which is philosophy of science involving ‘classification of human kinds’, that is, where science meets race, sexuality, and gender) this view is called ‘conceptual engineering’.

do not feel that ‘performance of art(ifice)’ *either* proves that agents can indeed construct an autonomous site of critique or have the discursive agentic power to produce ‘their own’ (or ‘new’) ‘conceptual artifacts,’ *nor* do I feel that *all* embodied activity is constrained or reproduced within a recursive feedback loop of inevitable doom and domination. Rather, I am proposing that performance art – especially when made as a social process of collective ‘voice-consciousness’ and construction – practices social fabrication that substantiates (at least through some ‘suspension of disbelief’) a *temporary* conceptual apparatus, a social construction through which ‘will’ (or conscious/conscientious ‘intention’) enables the cultural conditions for imagining ‘Other+ possible constructivities. It is this realm of ‘imagination’ and ‘consciousness’ that seems to appear through other similarly hybridic discourses, such as those of Kara Keeling (and her primary influences Édouard Glissant and Sylvia Wynter), as well as the artistic processes of performance artists, who directly re-configure both the overseer mentalities and the extremely pessimistic positions of Foucauldian poststructuralism. Many of these discourses, however, do rely heavily on science fiction and how *representations* operate in contradiction and competition with normative/dominant wordviews and narratives. Unlike the work of many of their contemporaries (and collaborators), IV Castellanos’s work has no narrative and has no relationship with science fiction or futurism. It does not “fabulate”⁴⁶. It is not a presentation of queer, Indigenous, or other ‘kinds’ of bodies or their culturally-located histories. Rather, Castellanos practices *social fabrication of concepts*. This may not mean, however, that the work as ‘art’ does not inherently involve representational politics,⁴⁷ nor the building of ‘worlds’ in terms of myth, story, or narrative.⁴⁸

Inside the space, IV Castellanos and their most recent travelling comrades, water protectors from Minnesota and Kentucky are watching a lab puppy gnaw a bone and talking about who got out of jail and who is still inside after the historic occupation of the Bureau of Indian Affairs the previous week. Many of us, still arriving at the space over the course of the next hour, ask Castellanos how they are doing after being tased in the back and neck during the occupation, and they reply calmly, telling the story as many times as it is requested. I make some coffee, another attendee/participant helps themselves to tea. In some ways, ‘the performance’ has not yet begun, in other ways it began years ago. In 2012, this small garage with the high ceiling became my home and that of several other Occupy organizers after our arts and activism co-op/squat house in Bushwick was teargassed and shut down. Throughout the 2010’s,

⁴⁶ See Tavia Amolo Ochieng’ Nyongó, *Afro-Fabulations: The Queer Drama of Black Life* (New York: New York University Press, 2019).

⁴⁷ ‘Representational politics’ underpins theories of democracy and political representation at large, describing political systems through which particular needs, values, aesthetics, and histories are seen to be represented by members of identifiable groups of persons. See Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005) for the sense that all politics within a representational democracy are identity politics.

⁴⁸ Beyond the scope of this paper is a discussion of ‘micropolitics’ in terms of prefiguration, futurism, and utopianism, that is ‘building a new world in the shell of the old’, in relationship with ‘microcosms’ and ‘paracosms’ within science fiction, theatre, and other forms of cultural expression and representation.

the space has hosted forms of durational, social, and relational performance art, as well as conferences, exhibitions, and organizing meetings.⁴⁹ This site already directs and delineates ways of both surviving and informing personal and political histories. Ways of both building and dismantling are performed across art and other spheres, oriented around and through repetition of bodily tendencies that build space for potential embodiments.⁵⁰ The site's motto remains scrawled in sharpie on the ceiling: *I Choose to Exist Like This*.

The materials arranged and ready *Homage to an Activist Tripod* include the drills and the wood, and they also include the cultural conditions through which the wills to make 'a performance' are enabled in the bodies and minds of assembled persons. Perhaps foremost, is the will to bracket a period of time, and an array of particular actions, out from an 'ongoing present' into 'a performance of art'. This 'bracketing out' is an initial way in which this performance constructs itself as 'art', and is thus the least unique (most inevitable?) element of this performance. It is the operation that perhaps frames all performance of art as at least partially 'representative', a time-space seen to be artificially built within and between the lines of 'larger' or 'real' temporalities their powerful drawing-up of designs and demands.

Lauren Berlant reframes familiar senses of performative speech acts to discuss a type of temporal 'situation' that emerges from "disturbed time [...] a historical present and not just everydayness because the atmosphere suggests a shift of historic proportions in the terms and processes of the conditions of continuity of life."⁵¹ Such situations compel poetic, affective 'stopping to think' *through and about* the historic context of present 'crises of the ordinary'. 'Stopping to think' both interrupts and materializes form(ation)s of history. "A [historic] process will eventually appear monumentally as form – as episode, event, or epoch", Berlant writes, "how that happens, though, will be determined processually, by what people do to reshape themselves and it while living in the stretched out 'now' that is at once intimate and estranged."⁵² Berlant is most simply saying that people construct history through their marking of meaningful episodes, events, epochs. She calls these constructed, bracket-off objects in time 'monuments'. In an art context, one might just as easily call these bracketed-off temporal objects 'performances'. I am bringing her theorizing into this paper however because she does not assume that 'monuments' present built or 'bracketed' time-spaces. Berlant's 'monuments' are not *artifacts* of process, rather she sees them situating self-reflexive processes themselves. Her interesting move is in attempts to show how such 'monumentalities', emerge from the ongoing 'stretched out now" through acts of speech and stopping to 'think about themselves'. Berlant thus not only suggests that histories can be constructed thoughtfully, or *on purpose, for reasons*, as oriented

⁴⁹ See *Institution is a Verb*, ed. Ayana Evans, Tsedaye Makonnen, Elizabeth Lamb, Esther Neff (New York: The Operating System, 2020).

⁵⁰ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 56–60.

⁵¹ Lauren Berlant "Thinking about feeling historical," *Emotion, Space and Society* 1 (2008): 4–5.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 5.

around the values, needs, desires, and sensibilities of persons in the present, she also suggests that these reasons and purposes may give primacy to the emotional and psychological well-being of those involved. Through building or fabricating of processes around reasons, values, and purposes, the competitive force of the “monument’s ability to ‘factualize’ or represent in a way that can participate in universal or dominant History may be dis-oriented, or re-oriented (queered, trans*formed⁵³). A concept of history, or a ‘historicity’, as a way in which present crises appear, feel, and have meaning for those experiencing them *as* (if) ‘history’, may be itself socially situation, undertaking its own ‘voice-consciousness’. In other words, *Homage to an Activist Tripod* may be seen building time-space for stopping to think and feel through – to ‘process’ – how the experiences of those present are contextualizing, signifying, marking out some moments as ‘history’, only insofar as such histories help them/us self-recognize, or construct their/our own ‘voice-consciousness’ as it may “constitute the ingredients for producing a countersentence”⁵⁴.

After a while, Castellanos asks who is going to help build and several of us take up the tools and begin to assemble a 10’ long box form. It is still not yet raining. The frames are each about 2’ square and there are eight of them, evenly spaced out between four long 2X4’s. Neva pre-drills, and I come behind with screws. Thea cuts reinforcement angle pieces with the chop saw, and Nathalie takes photos. Others shift on their feet and move around the building process, carrying the box of screws, making jokes, stepping in to hold or brace parts of the emerging structure, offering encouragement. During the building process, my attentions and intentions involve intimacies with the drill, with the wood, with Neva’s breath on my face. My consciousness also involves reflective estrangements from the present moment through interpretations of meaningfulness drawn from past experiences with Castellanos and the other people present, as well as from theoretical concepts. To be honest, while bearing down on each screw, I am thinking about writing this paper and about how Castellanos’s particular form of social or “relational”⁵⁵ performance art appears as movements between the practical and the theoretical, the sensuality of presence and the representations of History. This built space-time is a *conceptualization* of history not a historic representation, and subjectively, it helped me situate myself, this assembly, and the histories through which we are living, together and alone, in time and context.

It takes us an hour or so to build the structure. When it is finished, we take a short break to drink water, go to the bathroom, and smoke cigarettes. Then, Castellanos crawls into the structure with a roll of red caution tape on their arm. We talk

⁵³ See Kris Grey and Jennie Klein on the valuing of vulnerable bodies in performance art as trans*feminist ethos and praxis: “Trans*feminism: Fragmenting and Re-Reading the History of Art Through a Trans* Perspective,” in *Otherwise: Imagining Queer and Feminist Art Histories*, ed. Amelia Jones and Erin Silver (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016).

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” 50.

⁵⁵ See Nicolas Bourriard on art which shifts between rhetorical and constitutive modes and operates through relationships as forms of “operational realism,” and “presentation of a functional sphere in an aesthetic arrangement. The work proposes a functioning model and not a maquette.” *Esthétique Relationnelle* (Paris: Les presses du reel, 1998), 112.

as a group for a while, deciding *in situ* how to manage the next phase of the process. It takes six members of the social body to lift the structure with Castellanos inside of it and to tip it upright into the street. We brace our feet and hold steady. Castellanos stands ten feet in the air atop the narrow tower. From the perspective of passers-by, I imagine that the image echoes the flagpole climbers of the recent protests in DC as well as the scaling of imperialist and colonial monuments that demonstrators around the world have been performing to douse them in red paint and topple them. For theorists of decoloniality such as Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine Walsh, decolonial *praxis* appears as “affirmative and prospective thought-actions-reflections-actions that give shape, movement, meaning, and form to decoloniality.”⁵⁶ A ‘monumental form’ of a meaningful historic moment is suddenly activated, it emerges as a form of consciousness from moments of recognizing and enacting movement between thinking and doing. Once Castellanos is stabilized at the top of the structure, they throw down the roll of caution tape to each participant, one at a time. Once the person on the ground is holding the roll of caution tape, Castellanos asks a series of questions: “how do you feel coming to this site?” “how does this performance make you feel?” and then, “is there anything you need?” We all listen as each person speaks.

The time-space we built through this performance, our conceptualization of history as and in performance, may be most positively seen as a ‘poetics of relation’ that replaces the competitive value-relations of capitalism and colonial-patriarchal (re)productivities with otherwisely-(re)valued relations. Kara Keeling, citing Édouard Glissant, describes how poetic relation “allows for a fundamental transduction of selves, societies, and values into a multiplicity that, though open and changing, remains powerfully connected to the historical contexts of its production.”⁵⁷ Through the frame of this process of poetic relation as performance art however, there is a complication to a wholly positive sense of opening up this multiplicity. A performance as *art* is also deliberately-staged by particular persons, built as time-space on purpose and thus to serve purposes. Performance as art is *intentionally* perlocutionary, it makes history through its own, temporally-closing, categorically exclusive, and articulative materializations of worldviews and ways of worldbuilding. Within the category of social behavior framed as ‘art’, this performance constitutes theory about (and empirical experience with) how intentional speech and deliberate assembly can conceptualize history in ways that focus on, emphasize, and emerge as instances of Other value(s). As an evaluative structure that both opens and closes, this performance may be brought to bear on central problems in queer, decolonial, and anti-capitalist discourse. Through a Marxist lens, this problem may be framed as one of ‘autonomy’. Marcuse writes that art often appears as a “*caveat* to the thesis according to which time has come to change the world”, because art in its aesthetic dimension “can enter as a ‘regulative idea’”⁵⁸. A social form of performance art may stage a time-space

⁵⁶ Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 17–18.

⁵⁷ Kara Keeling, *Queer Time, Black Futures* (New York: New York University Press, 2019): 196.

⁵⁸ Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension: Towards a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics*, trans. Erica Sherover (Toronto: Fitzhenry and Whiteside, 1978), 68–69.

for caretaking and valuing of vulnerability that allows participants to take risks with their own emotions, values, and relationships. But care and (e)valuation can also be forms of control and coercion when framed as an artistic or aesthetic idea, hardening ‘real’ precarities and needs into forms correlated with their viable amelioration or fulfillment within a ‘time-space bracket. As a ‘knowledge’ of time-space, a ‘built’ form can situate structural violence, just as ‘queerness’ as a categorical social formation becomes part of what Keeling describes as “the structuring antagonism of the social and therefore of all those institutions, practices, traditions, and so on that seek to govern sociality and regulate the terms of sociability, including the management of time and space.”⁵⁹ In Castellanos’s work, (*p*)*articular* social forms do articulate artistic-aesthetic ‘autonomy’ as an object(ion) to ‘normative’ History *and* regulate senses of queerness through determined space-time managements including the situation of *certain* tasks completed by *certain* bodies. Is it possible to value diffractive, uncertain, multiplicit relationally *and* maintain the value of distinct Otherness and otherwisdom, all while constructing some-*thing* in particular? Lee Edelman responds to Lauren Berlant asking a similar question, describing a perpetual ‘encounter’ with “the unbearable doing of the logic that binds us to the world; how to share a thought or an object when the pressure of its handling by another risks breaking the object.”⁶⁰ Here, pressure is placed on who is seen as ‘another’ and who is part of an ‘assembly’, and on what (and how) is a ‘process’ and what (and how) is a ‘concept’, ‘construct’, ‘fact’, ‘historic event’, ‘object’ or other ‘artifact’. Can we build and carefully hold multiplicit assemblies and processes-becoming-artifacts? How can precarious balancing of risks and representations themselves be valued and evaluated? Built processes both determine and support how and when and whose risks are and can be valued. It matters who is participating and how these specific, culturally, politically, historically, and economically located persons are ‘handled’ by ‘others’ within and as the assembled and assembling. Judith Butler writes on how when assembling processes are divested from larger structures and “precarity is exposed”, assemblies struggle not only to be supported by institutions, networks, sensibilities, and rights, but with the *ideas* of these, and “each struggle is its own social form”⁶¹. Castellanos’s work as a discrete social form asks but does not answer the question: do movement towards liberation require more structure, more intentional coherence, more deliberation and more determined reinforcement of ‘our own values’, more coherent forms of ‘speech-consciousness’, or less? In the face of finance capital and the replacement of who and what matters – the value of life itself – with the logics and values of capitalism and its “quotidian violence”⁶², shall performance as art become a case for chaos that disrupts and disorients, or a practice performing processes towards and within a structural, value-based order ‘otherwise’? Is there a third option here that allows a performance as art to operate through both

⁵⁹ Keeling (2019): 17

⁶⁰ Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 69

⁶¹ Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 84

⁶² Keeling, *Queer Time, Black Futures*, 16–17.

intimacies (processes, assemblings) and estrangements (artifacts, objects, representations), (inter)depending on these as ways of building *temporary* social structures that test how we each (differently) think and feel from within them? Is it enough, right now, to situate time-space through which we can think, feel, and act through difficult balancing acts between situation and sight, form and process?

The questions we are each asked in performance by Castellanos are about ourselves in the present situation, our individual thoughts and feelings. Many speak of love, and express desires to support, heal, and care for one another. Keeling writes, “another way of thinking about the queerness in time as an ally in building the anti-fragility of freedom dreams, the obsessive love that sustains them, and those who advance such dreams within, without, and through love.”⁶³ Perhaps only due to the values of the specific persons involved, including those held and carried by the lead artist, is it possible to see this performance as stopping to think-through this queerness, as situating a practice of loving that values vulnerability, uncertainty, and precarity as states of the revolutionary body within capitalist-colonial quantification and (e)valuation paradigms. And yet, the performance itself still can be seen emerging in time as a closed theoretical formation, which marks an historic moment as an objective, representational ‘event’. Glissant again provides a way of thinking through this duality; for him, between transformative processes of re-orientation and emergent ideological representations is Relation, capitalized, a metaphysics of *créolite*, which challenges at least the inevitability of futures determined solely by the crises of the present. Glissant writes, “Relation is the knowledge in motion of beings, which risks the being of the world.”⁶⁴ Perhaps most simply, the performance processes Castellanos situates allows those present to experience the affects and consequences of our own senses of ‘monumental forms’ (episodes, events, epochs) while they are being brought into appearance by social assemblies that we may personally trust, that we may feel intentionally value our personal thoughts, feelings, bodies, theories, and senses of history. A non-representational concept of history is a process or performance of *conceptualizing* and *conceiving*, of constructing the concept of an historic ‘monument’ in context as a moment relative and relevant to the conceptions, care-orientations, and other value(s) of persons present.

When we have all answered to how we feel and think, when we have each been heard and seen individually and our needs expressed, Castellanos thanks us, and descales the structure. The affective space is both solemn and giddy. We step back and let the structure stand alone for a moment, before carefully bringing it back down to lay horizontally on the sidewalk. The ‘performance’ then spills out into other conversation, and continues on now through text messages, further plans and schemes, travels back to Minnesota to the water protection camp, and many other relations, including this paper. I am beginning to write this paper the morning after the performance, and it is raining now.

⁶³ Ibid., 22.

⁶⁴ Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 187.



Castellanos, IV, *Homage to an Activist Tripod*. Photo by Natalie Peña Peart.



Castellanos, IV, *Homage to an Activist Tripod*. Photo by Natalie Peña Peart.



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