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MemoryBabe No.17: The Wrestling Project

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree Master of Fine Arts

in

Visual Arts

by

Jesus Eddy Miramontes

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Chair

University of California San Diego

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

MemoryBabe No.17: The Wrestling Project

by

Jesus Eddy Miramontes

Master of Fine Arts in Visual Arts

University of California San Diego, 2019

Professor Teddy Cruz, Chair

The project entitled Memorybabe is an ongoing studies that explores subjectivity through memory, particular that of artist's father, George Miramontes. Memorybabe No. 17: The Wrestling Project illustrates the major creative underpinnings of this investigation through art's capacity to create the conditions for intervention, resistance, and transformation. The liminal qualities in the experiencing of 'art' has become an important in grasping agency, action, subjectivity, and autonomy. The focus of this study examines all the themes of Memorybabe through the spectacle of Pro-Wrestling.

The Silence Threatens to Burst into Flames

“Nature is a haunted house--but Art--is a house that tries to be haunted.”

Emily Dickinson

(Act I)

In positioning the pedagogical as a puzzle to my creative expression, I've attempted to unlock a significant variable within my understanding of the experiencing of art. My process of creating art has always paralleled an intellectual understanding that the pedagogical theory immeasurable resource to my practice, with no other study within the overall project of Memorybabe¹ illustrating its consequential functioning as clearly as MemoryBabeNo.17: The Wrestling Project². An essential feature of the Wrestling Project was confronting the ghost of fascism in our contemporary era, by excavating the conditions in which fascism breeds itself, as to better understand it on a pedagogical level. At the onset of the project, the project grew out of the excess of our political turmoil with the metaphor of 'wrestling' with our culturally and politically polarized moment was also relevant to the issues surrounding the ongoing project of Memorybabe. These two foundational building blocks developed into a large scale project that supported the weight of numerous artistic investigations intersecting, where

¹ The title for this overarching project comes from a Jack Kerouac (1922-1969) biography entitled Memorybabe. At the end of his life, Kerouac was working on novel that would chronicle his family's history. It was also the childhood nickname given to him for his feats in memory.

² Andy Kaufman referred to his wrestling career at the end of his life as the wrestling project. I affectionately used the same title for this study in tribute to his influence.

key pedagogical concepts and themes - such as passive/active spectatorship, critical engagement, and praxis of collective learning - could be staged in a way to force my hand in pulling together the essential concerns of my practice.

As a crucial building block in the composition of Act I sprouted out of conversations about the ghost of fascism in our contemporary era. From the onset of the project, this conversation gave birth to the character of Backlash, as an effort to make sense of the cultural polarization through the lens of the pedagogical forces underpinning it. Through the appropriation of Pro-Wrestling, I wanted to make palpable the dark cloud hanging over our collective heads by gesturing towards the predominant features plaguing this moment, beginning with narcissism. The wrestlers of Act I Backlash, as well as Killjoy, were cut from the same cloth. We'll begin by unfolding the character of Backlash through a set of pedagogical themes and ideas that influenced the Wrestling Project from the very beginnings of the project.

The Character of Backlash

The first time I heard the phrase backlash was in reading Susan Faludi's *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Woman*. My appropriation of the name Backlash was inspired by Faludi's response to the culture wars of the 1980s, a decade filled with attempts to reverse the gains of struggling minorities. That era's resistance fought against a backlash staged as a struggle for political power and social vitality via illusory battle-lines constructed by media [16]. The origin of Backlash's name is an important reference, for various reasons, but none more essential than linking the project to this era's struggle and legacy - how the battle for the collective and individual

agency was co-opted by commercialism, leaving us with self-determination commodified as self-improvement [16]. The fool's errand was forgetting how this moment of public/collective agency transformed into vengeful publicity - the first instance of being haunting that will be explored throughout the entire thesis.

Backlash the wrestler is an inherent critique stemming from the intensity of the backlash of identity politics. The issues surrounding identity politics are of great importance, but the central issue in the battle of Act I is how identity can easily become a struggle steeped in tribalism - leading to revelations that are not planted in factual truth but in narcissistic essentialism. By laying the blame at the feet of an oppositional ideology risks not critically railing against the perils of identity: self-identification as a formula that can easily be manipulated or transformed into prejudice. I fashioned Backlash and his Manager as the archetypes of societal evil to make an accessible representation of social division that sets the conditions that evade reality by only seeing what is in the pre-determined mind. I intended the heat³ that these two figures received as a deliberate trap to anger people to the point of falling out of themselves, into the 'real' conflict of the moment: passive entanglement with the ideological.

The Affect of Wrestling

Examining the affective qualities of wrestling helps to better understand my pedagogical intentions in constructing Backlash. As a creative method, wrestling is a theatrical performance that evokes a strong emotional response from its spectators through methods highly informed by earlier conventional forms of theatre, such

³ Heat is wrestling speak for the angry response from the audience to the Heel. The heat that a Heel receives is crucial to the success of the performance.

characters, costuming, staging, and conflict/action narration, are all pivotal in the orchestration of wrestling [44]. As a modern-day theatrical art-form, wrestling's mass appeal and consumption fulfill similar functioning of theatre dramatization - processing conflict between abstract virtues and vices for its admirers [44]. Like the conflict structure of the morality play, pro-wrestling is a battle between good and evil. The cyclical structure of wrestling ensures evil will be defeated, but if they're to be dramatic tension for the spectator, there needs to be investment through empathetic suffering. It is this essential aspect of wrestling that demonstrates how the medium appeals to the affective responses of the spectator through their empathetic identification with the embattlement of the performers.

Through empathetic suffering for the hero, the spectator invests in and is affected by the conflict with the representation of evil. In the tension between Backlash and Killjoy, the cycle of good and evil begins with the recognizable archetypes with the same evaporating victories and defeats that the audience could easily identify with and invest in. The implementation of archetypes is vital to wrestling's accessibility to millions of global spectators, as well as those artistic and intellectual types who, never having dreamt of witnessing live wrestling, found themselves screaming in a dark room and joining in on the spectacle. The possibility of this outcome was partially responsible for my appropriation of wrestling because the audience's investment in the Wrestling Project had to come through a medium where they would know how to behave, on some level.

This is why pro-wrestling was the ideal platform to carry a message - as artistic medium it implements a wide spectrum of the affective responses⁴ (interest/excitement, enjoyment, surprise/startle, anger/rage) to evoke intense feelings in the spectator [39]. In the spectacle of the art-form, wrestling produces memorable experiences that stimulate these affective qualities as to evoke a strong emotional response to possibly register the performance as a significant experience [39]. My ultimate ambitions in appropriating the affective responses in the spectacle of wrestling was to access the experiential potential of the performance. I deliberately mobilized an essential buy-in of wrestling (to lose oneself in the spectacle of the experience) for the battle of Act I, so as to make the audience vulnerable to the implosion of Act II. It was vital for the audience's to take the bait of Backlash as a means to build a communal connection that allowed the audience to become a part of the performance.

The Audience & The Fixers

The spectator of the wrestling project confronted a buy-in of the pre-conditions of experiencing a piece of art as a platform for critical re-contextualization. Even those in the audience who lacked knowledge on critical contemporary art were well aware that the performance would be distorted on some level. This distortion came through the influence of Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed*. From Boal's work, the Wrestling Project inherited features of his Forum Theatre, primarily Boal's method of structuring plays for actors and non-actors to perform with a scripted core (like wrestling) as a

⁴ The Script theory of Silvan Tomkins was a decisive influence that put in place conceptual tools regarding affect and memory. His research elucidates how six innate affects can mark an experience to register as significant. This affect system is in response to stimuli that performs the task of problem-solving after being triggered by an affective response. This is a process of memory, how we remember certain aspects of important experience as distinguished from others.

means to theatricalize oppression relevant to the audience [7]. In the form of what I called 'Fixers⁵,' I curated four small groups to participate in the audience, which was under the guise of integrating the general audience to the wrestling performance. And like Boal's non-professional actors participating in the performance, these Fixers were essential in ensuring an enlivened space, encouraging engagement with the wrestling performance itself, on one level, while facilitating the pedagogical functioning underpinning Boal's work.

So, for Boal, this pedagogical concern of self-reflexivity were situated on aesthetic grounds where he concocted strategies to fight against the proposition of passivity in the theatre experience. Boal argued that the escapist dimensions of theatre offer the spectator a space of passivity that, at its most insidious level, provides them with the opportunity to adopt the values, concerns, and world views of the performance as their own [36]. In the Wrestling Project, I positioned the fixers to place the general audience in a Boalesque⁶ situation, that played with the tension of real and fake⁷ within pro-wrestling, for the purpose of instrumentalizing the empathy of the spectator to feel outside themselves. For Augusto Boal, the tension within the hierarchies of high and low encompasses the role of spectator taking back the modes of production (theatre) as a

⁵ The Fixers are distinguished from the 'Plant' of Pro-wrestling - actors posing as fans to enhance the entertainment value of the experience - because they were selected to enhance the potential for self-reflexivity in the experience, for themselves and for those around them.

⁶ The Wrestling project was, first and foremost, an art piece borne out of a desire to unfold the situational process of learning through performance. There are countless influences that factored into this turn towards a performance, but none more essential than the influence of Michael Asher and his Situational Aesthetics. From the onset, the pedagogical direction that the performance was developed and execution was highly informed by Asher's work.

⁷ The tension between the real and fake of real life, explored through the realness apparent in wrestling that goes beyond its obvious fakeness. When a wrestler is slammed down on the mat, they reach to the sky with a twisted expression as to exaggerate the sound of it, the theatricality of the gesture doesn't negate the reality that real bodies are hitting real surfaces. And as much as we passively experienced wrestling, the most exciting moments held some level of recognition that these people were, in fact, throwing their bodies around for us.

means of empowerment. In appropriating wrestling, I placed tremendous value on Boal's proposal of theatre (art experience, in general) being taken from the powerful few by the masses [48] through the weaponization of empathy as a method to jolt individuals out of passive spectatorship.

The focus of passivity in the spectator within Boal's practice came through the influence of Brechtian Epic Theatre. One of Brecht's theory of the estrangement effect hindered the audience's identification processes of accepting the actions and utterances of a play to possibly register on a more conscious critical plane. This pedagogical model of theatre disconnects the audience from passively engaging with art. The distancing effect is achieved by way of the fourth wall, making it harder for the spectator to forget themselves as a part of the event which is really taking place [14]. The disrupting of the 'staged illusion' is generating the distancing effect: the space between performer and spectator casts all participants in a strange light as a means to break the conditions of passive acceptance and enjoyment as mere "entertainment." No matter if we want it or not, for the sake of processing information - to interpret, to decipher, to make use out of the words and actions being presented in a work of art - there needs to be an investment by the spectator that is beyond passive acceptance. In the end, if the Wrestling Project's live performance was successful at implementing the distancing effects, is less important than recognizing that this functioning within the artwork is pivotal in doing something with art that is beyond mere 'entertainment'.

The Critical Laughter of Paulo Freire

The pedagogical concepts of Paulo Freire highly informed Boal's theatre work, particularly his view on audience passivity being inherently vulnerable to manipulation. There was a critical presence to the Fixers that aimed to make sense of the tokenism of the intellectual spectator through the transgressive power of laughter. The undertaking of the Wrestling Project strived to combat this tokenism by creating an experience that registered on both an intellectual and emotional level. But, in evoking the former through the latter, the guttural response of the body as a means to stimulate the higher archives of thought. I wanted to facilitate a laughter directed at the self and the engagement with symbolic screaming match of our contemporary moment. Through the immediacy of its affect, laughter can extract moments of transgression out of the stranglehold of passive (but systematize) ideological learning [27].

This project attempted to navigate the seriousness in which people carry their hardening ideological stances through what Freire points out as three forms of consciousness: naive, superstitious, and critical. Freire speaks of naive consciousness as being characterized by an oversimplification of the complexities of the world, while superstitious consciousness leans towards cynicism with no sense of agency emerging out of self-awareness [39]. With critical consciousness, there's an emergence of capacities that intensify towards collective dialogue and critical consciousness-raising intended as a by-product of true engagement [39]. Critical laughter evokes responsibility for the conditions of critical dialogue. Through Act I of Wrestling Project, I wanted to interject a critique into the current methods of unveiling reason for another human being through techniques that only slightly disguise the aggression of a force entry.

The tension of Act I seized upon critical laughter through the unhinging of the Killjoy, where the the audience's release in the form of screaming and hissing flipped into a critical space through his slippage into prejudice. My intentions in erupting critical laughter through Killjoy's digression strives to reveal an individual's complexity as a subject. The refusal to acknowledge the risks of Killjoy slippage sets the precarious conditions in the transferring-of-knowledge unto individuals who are made 'to carry without question' a burden⁸. This misplacement of the psychic weight of unmindfulness revolves around a core Freirean pedagogical concept of false generosity.

For Freire, oppressors must perpetuate injustice in order to have the opportunity to express "generosity." In an unjust social order, the permanent conditions of "generosity" are that which nourishes 'false generosity,' starving the oppressed to become desperate for their meager resources, or their perception of resources⁹. Thus, true generosity is demonstrated by those who fight to destroy that which feeds individual's engagement with false generosity. Freire states that engagement with false generosity equally oppresses both the perpetrator and victim. The first act of the Wrestling Project examines how the conditions of false generosity as central to the embattlement of Backlash and Killjoy, revealing an entrapment instead of the serious intellectual work of radical pedagogy. This process of evading through missed guided political action stops short of the critical, and in actuality, lands somewhere closer to the cynicism of superstitious consciousness [30].

⁸ These falsely neutral curricula train students to observe things without judging, to see the world from the official consensus, to carry without questioning, as if the given society is fixed and fine.

⁹ The perception of their resources in relation to the immaterial things that are devalued in a consumerist culture: such as honesty, warmth, generosity, talent, or the undeniable truth of a human beings capacity to grow and learn.

So, we must laugh, at ourselves and the world for the forces interfering with our critical thought continue to produce the impression of false illuminations that make the distance from the uncritical status quo nothing more than an image to cling to and not a reality. By the same token, this battle is one of aesthetics, or more accurately, the experiential becoming object, as one must figure out a path to overcome the struggle between active engagement and passivity. Within the framework of this performance, I intended critical laughter to intrigue the cynicism of this moment. The mental divisions that have kept 'us separated from them' have tightly locked into a position where we find ourselves screaming at the obvious villain in Backlash, while in the same turn, risking the occasion to see ourselves as the oppressed and the oppressors when identifying with Killjoy [39].

Act I Conclusion: Dumb Objects Make Dumb People

At the core of this study in wrestling, lies the space of experiential that opens up to the pedagogical moments of people experiencing themselves in the world as subjects among objects who are set apart by the ability to 'read' and thus, self-reflect. The distinguishing factor in the experiential is that we are all performing on a poorly lit stage where we bare witness to the social matrix playing out along a multitude of lines, such as labor, of the familial/kinship, in success and in madness, and so on. What is crucial is the critical distance one can achieve between the self and the affections of experience that are essential to focusing the emotional nearsightedness that it poses to one's agency. An essential facet of the experiential in the aesthetic experience is the internal mechanism of processing the world through images. The distinguished of human

consciousness establishes subjectivity through oppressive forces that position us in the world with an advantage or disadvantage. A part of that potentiality is bound to individual responsibility, i.e visual/critical literacy, that distinguishing the human subject as performing a steady hand in the success of their own existence and the betterment of others within that existence. In combating the forces that are constantly attempting to convert exuberant life into inert, mutable objects, I was attempting on aesthetic terms within the Wrestling Project, to explore this critical literacy in Killjoy's domain simply because he had to be the allegorical figure who could lead us into the elusive core investigation of the overarching composition.

The essence of the first act is that the deliberate mishandling of information will produce a silence between parties (on a collective and individual level) that erodes trust. The silence that threatens to burst into flames is the silence that has befallen on our cultural landscape. Through, the silence of our embattlement we move slower towards discourse, maybe even risking the possibility for it. What is detrimental to our collective social body is an examination of the rigidity of the ideological standoff, so as to reimagine what it means to be human, first; and an embodiment of our values and beliefs, second. The battle that begins the Wrestling Project is essential to the point of obviousness Killjoy and Backlash were representations beyond their obviousness archetypal projections because the embattlement is more complex than the simplicity that is being attempted in its real-life application. This is the issue that is being wrestled with, metaphorically, in the ring. The narrative arch needed to place emphasis on the growing of a monster as a process of an exhaustion in dealing with the ghosts of our past that are wreaking havoc on the gash in the social fabric.

ProjectionistPleaseFocus

"I am not about copyRight, or CopyLeft, I am copyRiot."

Ricardo Dominguez

"Everything you can imagine is real."

Pablo Picasso

(Act II)

There's something about hiding that needs to present itself here in the opportunities to be present without revealing, there's a process of accepting reality as performance of obscuring, that has everything to do with the tension of presence/absence. This tension is ultimately consummated in the experiencing of art, or the artful; a functioning piece of art creates a trace of presence that was expelled from the reality of the experience, which stands as the residue of that experience in its absence. Beyond the need for cultural preservation, art is embedded in the process of documentation and archivization of the underpinning 'beauty' of our condition, which is the jurisdiction of 'art.' Because the Wrestling Project was a live performance that was always intended to be experienced as such, a crucial but concealed aspect of this investigation was capturing that evaporating experience, as to revealed art as not present nor absent but somewhere in-between that captures a trace of the ineffable quality that makes it arresting, at moments.

When art reaches levels of inexpressible strength, it becomes an object (document) that possesses the ability to disturb or to smash individual moments of reality. This study was attempting to grasp this strength by playing with tension of having live phenomenon exist in real time and needing it to abide to the 'regime of documentation'¹⁰ [35]. In creating a wrestling study, there's an implementation of spectacle that advocates for the individual responsibility for the natural human inclination for projection. For the battle of the performance isn't with the obvious political representations, but with the act of manifesting passive engagement with the illusion (apparition) of the image¹¹. Here, there is an expansion of the position of spectator that implores them to recognize themselves as a projectionist. The non-fight of Act II is an enigmatic articulation for the distinguishing moments of 'real' that keep alive the self-reflective process of seeing things for what they are, which are being threatened by the ever expanding menace of flattening one-dimensionality. The battlecry of Act II is in focusing the 'situational knowledges' [17] that are being lost in the translation of representation.

The Character of (The Beautiful) Bastard

It was no surprise to any of my wrestling collaborators that the Bastard would be based on Andy Kaufman¹², even though they found his significance to the Wrestling

¹⁰ Abiding to law of documentation is what ultimately affords art the duality of uselessness and otherworldliness, all at the same time.

¹¹ This is the processes of living with the afterimage of 'harden' knowledge in Plato's Cave - a projection in the form of shadows instigates false living with the image of the thing (as with the idealized representations) instead of the real thing.

¹² Andy Kaufman was a stand-up comedian who rose to prominence in the late 1970s through his groundbreaking performance style and his appearances on the popular television show Taxi. He died at the age of 35 from lung cancer.

Project a little abstruse. The Bastard was undoubtedly a centerpiece of the Wrestling Project's composition because Kaufman's strategies deconstructing representation through an 'excess of representation itself' [2]. These strategies consisted of juxtaposing conflicting expectations on the image, as a means to expose the integrity of the image, to create a discrepancy in the viewers expectations that nudged the spectator's attention toward the 'larger processes of social representation' of which he (and they) were embedded [2]. Through this approach to performance, Kaufman explored the boundaries between theatre and reality where he created interventions that attempt to shatter the 'symbolic framework of spectacle' [13]. His performances in wrestling were not attempts in smashing the doctrine of that art-form but as a means to use the medium to smash reality [13]. In paying tribute to Kaufman through the Bastard's attire¹³ activated these strategies and not simply to reward those who could decipher the visual cue of Kaufman's presence.

The naming of (The Beautiful) Bastard points towards this further functioning, which came through reading the influential section in Roland Barthes' *Mythologies* entitled *The World of Wrestling*. In his examination, Barthes distinguishes how the wrestling audience seeks the highly constructed image. In French wrestling, the figure of the bastard represents the unstable character who 'accepts rules only when useful and transgresses against them [6].' The French Bastard fabricates crisis by introducing unexpectedness in a spectacle ruled by the 'principles of expectation,' becoming an inherent transgressor who's violations threaten but effectively reinforces the rules of the

¹³ The Beautiful Bastard's attire was completely based on his outlandish wrestling costume of thermal underwear and swimming trunks.

spectacle [6]. In his ultimate performance¹⁴, Kaufman fashioned himself a traditional Heel by setting it against his persona as a Hollywood star turned trickster. Through this transgressive persona as an artist who materialized ‘comedic’ performances that were devoid of a personal self adeptly aligned himself with Barthes’ description of the French Bastard. Thus, he was to become our Bastard.

The Beautiful World of Kaufman’s Authenticity

A significant preoccupation in our contemporary moment is the ideal of authenticity. To be authentic is to be real in a smokescreen world. Authenticity has become a highly demanded quality that matters in this undertaking precisely because it relates to the act of projection. We project what we want the world to see because we project to the best of our understanding what constitutes an essence. The ‘artifice of persona’ is central to the transgressive figure of Andy Kaufman because his whole artistic enterprise was based on endlessly reframing the self in the ‘vacant lot’ of identity. Kaufman’s consistent nostalgic referencing of the 1950s iconography of his childhood¹⁵ was a developmental core of the Wrestling Project - where the Bastard’s presence alluded to the complexity of identity (persona) in relationship to the act of hiding. One of Kaufman’s key strategies of hiding was in utilizing the pastiche of his beloved pop-culture iconography, predominantly based in the 1950’s imagery: Elvis Presley impersonator, a disgruntled lounge singer, or a Mighty Mouse sing-a-long.

¹⁴ Kaufman referred to his final project as the wrestling project. And this is why I affectionately titled this study The Wrestling Project.

¹⁵ This is a hugely important connection to Memorybabe’s ‘looking back’ to 1980s culture in the form of Kaufman, Horror B movies, Spalding Grey, and the news clips of the Reagan era culture wars in the final Act.

The 'certain' truth of Kaufman was in his refusal to occupy the self-evident position of identity, instead making use of the artifice of his artistic persona as a no-one figure that occupied the space between absence and presence - making art out of the 'vacancy of persona' [22]. This act of 'not being here or there' was pivotal to the performance because it was of this essence that (The Beautiful) Bastard embodied the transgressive figure (in the artistic sense) that threatens the spectacle of wrestling, comedy, art, or reality. In the "absence of meaning" of Kaufman's artistic example, I devised the Bastard as a machine gun to 'serial signifiers' [22]. Kaufman's fearless example as a creative figure who, against all odds and through all extremes, challenged the spectator to think out of step with themselves and society. As much as the Bastard seemed to be nonsensical to the point of being meaningless, his presence was meant to achieve the space of liminality. The quality of a liminal space created out of a challenge to identity at the core of the Bastard's monologue. The Bastard's speech drew a ring around the question of presence and absence as an attempted to reach outside of itself, with the hidden goal of the wrestler's performance enticing the hesitant spectator to step into the metaphorical ring.

Within the delineate space of the ring, the Bastard begins a dance with the audience that scratches at the central concern that Roland Barthes pinpointed in *Mythologies*: the wrestling match is really with a process of transforming raw cultural materials into modern myths and how human being are converted into myth, or more precisely, transformed into a schematic image. This line of questioning the referentiality of the image, apprehending the live immaterial of the object (such as attitude, knowledge, affects, etc...) as positioned towards the process of one-dimensionality [30]

of information, as to hold the monolithic image in our minds as a means of survival¹⁶. This is what makes our Bastard beautiful and what is most poignant about Kaufman's artistic practice is his ability to hollow out contemporary mythologies by bastardizing the position of the authentic self in a counter-offensive approach to the aesthetic experience. The Bastard's presence is the machine gun' to the identity-based embattlement of Act I - beginning an implosion of Act II that scratched at the entanglement of the image. I wanted to embroil the intellectual/artistic standing of the spectators in the tradition of the French Bastard, who was wholly there to reinforce and sustain the rules of the spectacle.

The Monologue of (The Beautiful) Bastard

As soon as the Bastard begins his monologue, it quickly becomes apparent that the friendly sing-a-long introduction gave way to taunting the audience. The allure of nostalgia in the Bastard's *'It's a Small World'* intro music recoiled when he asked the audience 'How are you?' I intended to push the audience back on their heels with the first insult of 'Well, it seems like Ya'll might need some soap for your brains!' These heelish proclamations articulate the practice of transforming complex physical phenomena into monolithic compositions that bear no criticality, thus becoming mythological images in our heads. The mouthpiece of the Bastard aimed at instigating a responsibility for the act of focusing that projecting¹⁷. It was a plea, with an emphasis

¹⁶ For Barthes, this process of creating contemporary mythologies around mass culture (wine, cheese, wrestling, etc...) was how the bourgeoisie peddle their values to the rest of existence, creating the inescapable shadowy conditions of their cultural influence.

¹⁷ The phrase 'projectionistpleasefocus' comes from headers of film roles, as a reminder to the projectionist to do a very essential part of the job. But, the phrase has always been compelling because I felt that it wasn't just directed towards me as a projectionist, but instead direct on an individual, human level.

being placed on how these processes of the unexamined image creates a debt that is ultimately extracted from the symbolic resources of the social arena.

Barthes' mythological proclamations of unearthing half-truths, some-truths, absolute truths, and/or an assortment of crystalize information that stands to be taken as the real thing [9]. The Bastard mocks the audience by pointing out fear, asking "what is everyone afraid of? Because I am not afraid of nothing!" At the expense of the audience's confusion, the Bastard alludes to the comfortable dependence on representation, now deriding the ever-increasingly impatience of the audience, stating 'I'm going to be a Your Villain [...] I believe in being your purist straight to the helt!' This harassment of the spectators evokes the 'real presence' of Kaufman's short-circuiting of the self, where the only 'real thing' behind the various masks of identity is the idea of Andy Kaufman [34]. The underpinning purpose of (The Beautiful) Bastard is an attempt to evade the trappings of identity, as to apprehend the difficult-to-grasp 'intensity' of the 'pre-symbolic, not yet culturally coded [31], [experience] based in [the] embodied [30].'

At the end of his monologue, the Bastard burns-out after exerting all the exuberant life he had to offer; he becomes an empty shell. But, in the light of Kaufman's example, (The Beautiful) Bastard leaves 'the attributes of liminality' as a gift for spectator(s) to possibly fall into an in-between position of potentiality [55]. In the transitional/indeterminate quality of the liminal 'strange spaces' that artists create, first for themselves and then for the allusive other, lies the construction of an 'experience.' In the symbolism of the Bastard's reference to Kaufman, I wanted to tackle the complexities of the transgressive figure who creates a communal space of liminality through art, which begins the process of unravelling presence/absence in our

contemporary struggle with authenticity, persona, and self. When (The Beautiful) Bastard completes what he can as an apparition of Kaufman's liminality, he screams out for HAU to symbolically tag him into the dance with the audience. After endeavoring to finish what he started through HAU, (The Beautiful) Bastard climbs the post to serenade the audience with a peace-offering in lip-synching to the audience that he wasn't seeking to set the world on fire but simply wanted to start a flame in their hearts.

A Live Tradition

(Act II - Section II)

The exchange of gifts in archaic societies were fundamental economic forms of reproducing themselves, their cultures, and their societies [11]. In the specific forms of mutual gift-making, these societies engaged in ceremonies where the conditions of knowledge were reflexive, and interactive forms of reciprocity were situated in collective feelings of responsibility [22]. There's an overarching kinship that links the terms of these archaic societies' social structures as it connects several threads important for a discourse on the real, i.e the social. Donna Haraway's 'Make Kin, Not Babies,' matters here because at its core, the whole of this writing is a plea for kinship, and not simply a reproduction of oneself for self-preservation but an actual investment in the commons beyond self-interest [29]. Because the artistic manifestation of the gift in the contemporary era seems to be pointing towards the space of social interaction - that implores an important borrowing from gift economy theory in the form of Marcel Mauss's concept of Hau.

Both Derrida and Levi-Strauss used Marcel Mauss' concept of Hau as an essential starting point in their exploration of the gift. For Mauss, Hau was the process of merging the giver, receiver, and returner, as it is based in the language of the indigenous people who, in only having one word for all these performative positions, referred to all these merged identifications as Hau. The idea of merging, particularly in regards to the artistic process of making for others is compelling because for Mauss this was an activity of filling in the holes, strives to reconstruct a whole out of parts in his overarching sociological research and theoretical project. Levi-Strauss points out that 'this is not manifestly possible [38],' stating that this theoretical concept gave Mauss 'the illusion of squaring his account [38].' But, the shortcoming of attempting to make 'whole out of parts' is what we insist upon when creating value out of excess, as indeed is brought into question when reserving a surplus of symbolic content [35]. It all comes down to the obviousness of the gesture, not in a self-serving performance, but in acknowledgement that creativity is not a privilege for all.

Since rise of Conceptual Art, there had been a developing critique of value that has shifted our relationship to the art object into a critical space that questions its status as object/commodity. The evolution of art production since the rise of this critique has produced generations of artists who have staged the production of the art object as a location of questioning value, and as to draw attention to the responsibility of creating art - as a social good, as collective resource, as a way to dislocate value from the object to the experiencing of art. The purpose or function of art within a society has prompted a question about the proper use of resources, and through this inquiry, there are some important stepping stone towards some sort of collective/creative praxis. Through

Mauss' gift economy conceptions, Hau became a crucial lynchpin of the Wrestling Project because in the complexity of exchange, I've pinpointed the embedded societal desire to make 'whole out of parts' to create impactful gesture towards and for the world. It was critical to locate the mouthpiece of the Wrestling Project not only as a means to distinguish it from 'regular ol rassin', but to mobilize it for the purpose of making a gesture that attempts the manifestations fundamental to reproducing ourselves through community. Once this message revealed itself and the monologue flowed, it was ordained for a wrestler that could go by no other name but HAU.

The Character of HAU

The two possible acronyms for HAU give credence to the two more meaningful reasons for appropriating HAU as a wrestler name - all roads speak to a desired place that I wanted to lead the spectators of the Wrestling Project. The first comes from the actual origins of Mauss' gift economy (explained above); the other, rests with the simple fact that HAU is half the word of haunted. Both of these sources relate to the acronyms of 'How Are You', and the military slang of 'Heard Acknowledged and Understood¹⁸.' The aim of HAU's presence is connected to the ghost story as a warning call: in understanding how living through memory is a process of being haunting by the ghosts of past memories. HAU's monologue alludes to this in a poetically discreet and enigmatic manner, but was intended to allure the spectator to possibly grasp the underpinning concepts buried within performance, if not in the performance than through the documentation of that experience. But, before we begin, there is an

¹⁸ The military acronym is actually Heard Understood Acknowledged but that doesn't spell HAU. I included in the mixed rendition simply because it matters in the conception of what I wanted HAU to accomplish.

essential detour down a path that stumbles upon an inception that begins to explain HAU's value as a haunting: Marvin Gaye's presence as metaphorical light through the fog of HAU's ghost story.

Marvin Gaye's crowning artistic achievement *What's Going On* was made in response to the social turmoil of the late 1960s - not only a reflection of the struggle that ensued in the streets but as an expression of the emotional baggage of living through it as an artist. In the light of his inspirational presence, Gaye was a catalyst in developing HAU as a mouthpiece that not only attempts the conditions of his artistic achievement but as a means to collapsed the raw components of that condition into HAU's ghost story monologue. In working through his utterly confusing existential crisis, Gaye's created an uncanny artistic presence that evokes the task of taunting self-reflectivity out of the repellent conditions of societal upheaval, as to possibly consummated the beauty of this moment's silver-lining.

Lastly, through Gaye's gift, HAU developed into a representation of the artistic figure a keen to the Shakespearean fool: HAU speaks truth, although in a encoded mysterious message, to a disillusionment of our moment. HAU was the fool who attempts a prescription to our collective suffering by aiming to cure the disease with the disease. At the core of HAU's ghost story is a warning that ideology that can create a dependency on mediated reality - to word, the image, the representation - that can distort the world. In a way, HAU is a fool who preaches forgetting in an inverted manner - as an immunization to the ossifying effects of ideology by forgetting oneself as means of removing unnecessary shelving within one's thinking. HAU was called to the stage by (The Beautiful) Bastard to advocate for the possible completion of the 'strange place'

that he had created with his presence. In a way, (The Beautiful) Bastard and HAU were a tag team fighting a common opponent that was unbeknownst to the audience, not the individual spectators but the insidious misdirecting representations.

Strange Places¹⁹: The Monologue of HAU

In writing HAU's monologue, several artistic and literary influences shaped its ultimate form, and thus, were responsible for the implosion of Act II. The monologues of Spalding Gray were pivotal in conceptualizing HAU as a representation of myself as the artist as the fool. The Bastard calls for HAU to join the dance where he attempted to create the conditions of 'strange places', while HAU is the embodiment of the internal struggle of being artist. The artist is tasked in creating 'speech' out of the mysterious inner unknown that transmutes the 'experience' through a medium. HAU is the spirit of creation, while the Bastard is a specter within *A Live Tradition*. When the Bastard asked the audience 'how are you?' it is for the purpose of seeding this connection to the 'spirits of the dead' that can be 'distinct, current, [and] alive' [19]. HAU immediately acknowledges this presence by pointing out there are 'a lot of ghost out here tonight' - arousing the thought that the spectators themselves were ghost. In actuality, HAU is referencing the presence of ghost-like figures in Gaye, Gray, Kaufman, and the countless 'others' who create an invisible but inert force within us.

These opening words begins HAU's broach of the intricacy of exchange, that venturing to make sense of an 'allusive whole' that is even 'more real than each of the parts' [38]. As Mauss strived to reconstruct a whole out of parts, HAU steps a little closer

¹⁹ In essence, the culture of strange places where strange people interact with strange art—creates platforms for experimental exploration that kept alive art's capacity for radical criticality.

to focusing on the illusion of squaring away the account by daring the audience to ask him about his mask, stating 'you, see, this face isn't a face - do you remember your original face?' Following up on the question of 'How are you?' with this reference to face and mask acts as a warning against holding the creative spirit a prisoner to the image. In this trepidation, reality births Dumb Objects that are endowed with a voice that attracts the inarticulate - those without tongue who speak an articulation against and not for themselves [19]. These Dumb Objects extend themselves in all directions of time and space, are highly adaptable in the construction of masks, and are mistakenly being distributed as offerings in our short-circuited form of exchange. This is essential to HAU declarations of 'original face' - where 'life is not an image' but the raw unmediated components that can be a force vulgar enough to drive away that ghost-voice that haunts our innate desire to give, receive, and return the 'real' of our being [24].

This preoccupation with hiding finally reveals its significance as HAU proceeds to link these conditions of mask wearing to that which is 'haunting our boredom;' shutting down the reflexive knowledges that register the intricate and chaotic initiations of life as 'embodied knowledges' [17]. In preventing the cultural shifts embedded in complexity of exchange, reciprocity becomes an inexpressive behavior where subjects wrestle with collective responsibility as a performance of trivialized actions. And where there should be a place for transgressive occupation, there is only foreclosure²⁰.

This is vital in recognizing how subjectivity is embodied or situated in the holiness of individual selves; as being housed in us. The foreclosure of HAU's ghost story

²⁰ In the *Psychic Life of Power*, Judith Butler uses the word foreclosure to express the creation of subjectivity, thus establishing the metaphorical association of the individual as being property-like, and one that is created, formed, and manufactured as such.

is how that spatial element to haunting, i.e the haunted house, is what he is attempting to locate for the audience. The foreclosure of individual subjectivity is a result of hegemonic dominance that, through the terms and conditions of our subjectivity as a haunted house, forecloses subjectivity by virtue of Dumb Objects making us into Dumb People. A possible counter-offensive is the art object/experience, that on Emily Dickinson's terms, makes the conditions of art a 'house' that tries to be haunted.' This is where the foreclosure of human subjectivity through an 'embrace of power', can be overturned to 'embrace [the] marginality²¹' [19] that occupies the periphery of HAU's claim of 'the great champions of old [24]' This is the 'presence' of what is being framed as 'real' inside the ropes of that moment in the Wrestling Project.

It is an embrace²² of the dialectics of the dispossessed, not in terms of monetary capital, labour, or tribal associations, but to understand the palpable nature of abstracted social relations through the myriad cultural forms and structures that act as 'strange places'. In interrogating the practices that secure hegemony reveals the pedagogical task of connecting how those structures can possibly be undone. The question perpetually at the crux of critical theory is how to mobilize the perceptive resources that lie dormant in the individual, so as to generate a resistance that will unmake the disadvantaged position in social relations and practices [30]. In forgoing the search for formula, there's an acceptance in the ghosts that keep balance, or out of

²¹ Butler invokes this kind of imagery by using the work foreclosure, while Cindi Katz uses it to a similar effect in *Toward a Minor Theory*, stating 'political gestures for the current moment when so much feels foreclosed.'

²² My use of embrace is based on Donald Trump deranged press conference after the midterm elections where he repeatedly used the phrase 'the embrace' in reference to those Republicans who lost reelection because they refused to embrace him. I wanted to incorporate Trump's use of the term 'the embrace'. In a way I want to advocate the 'embrace' of Trump as an artistic influence (as to stain your soul) so as to get to the conversation revolving around the sneaky feeling of being haunted or of haunting something, someone. It's a discussion of foreclosure in reference to haunting a location that...

balance, clarity of vision. In the regiment of practice, of repetition, we acknowledge that humans are genetically hardwired to seek patterns when squaring away the forest of signs and symbols. But, what is also vital to achieving the benefits of the vetted knowledges of a live tradition - is a combination of embracing randomness as a consistent and essential ingredient to reality while attempting to lose sight of yourself to seize the labour in maintaining one's own well-worn path to a 'strange place'.

Act II Conclusion: Heard, Acknowledged, Understood - My Labor is My Protest²³

The act of working collectively creates a space that strives to fulfill an important function within a *Live Tradition* of recent art practice: socially engaged art as critical weapon that mobilizes experiences of transformative potential. In building out a nucleus for a complex cultural ecosystems, there's a re-injection of knowledges into the public space that combats the repressive problematics of 'voluntarist agency' - the principle of relying on voluntary action that strives to abolish false generosity, but often reinforces and romanticizes it through social hierarchy. This resonates with the inherent societal backlash to the exclusivity to 'awareness,' that which is the basis for Killjoy's moral gatekeeping being vainly self-referential. We cannot grow unless undertaking the strenuous effort for reconciliation that requires seeing how 'others' as being haunted by their 'uncertain' ghosts, and how this is in part responsible for their untraveled conditions within a *Live Tradition*.

²³ The title for a Theaster Gates monograph, *My Labour is My Protest*, is a phrase that encapsulates the labor that is invested in spaces as a form a protest. Gates art practice involves working with structures slated for demolition in the historically neglected neighborhood of Chicago's South Side and transforming them into spaces for community performance, discussion, and public engagement.

In respect to the ghost of past individuals who, in having a deep intellectual relationship with the ghost of their past forces, benefit and keep alive the essence in the most important of cultural artifacts. A *Live Tradition* poignantly adheres the 'real' of the experiential into the raw materials of the creative process - where once having accepted what has been given, either in the sense of inspiration or talent - compels one to make the work so as to offer it to an audience, to an other, and to oneself. It is in this acceptance of the terms of being a creator that we engage in the enterprise of exchange: the 'real' work of reframing what is discovered in the *Live Tradition* is the gift of liminality. What sustains any monetary system of exchange is this imperceptible cultural struggle for the conditions of HAU's ethos of giving, receiving and returning. The obligation itself can stand as a representation of the 'emotional-mystical cement' that converts the raw material of the evaporating, experiential moment into the intoxicating force animating and distinguishing the art object/experience [29].

The Wrestling Project was intended to locate the interpretation of this intent beyond goodwill - as art made as a form of political or interventionist action but as to step closer to the vicinity of Mauss's conception of HAU. Through the influence of socially engaged artists, it has become a preoccupation to attempt a form of praxis by taking the raw materials of social realm as the building blocks of the art piece, with the intent of impacting the social arena [12]. These formations of activism are the reverberations of the assaults on the art world through critical art-making of socially engaged artists. In making more impactful gestures towards the social world, there's a communal revelation at the core of HAU's monologue that warns against the conditions of *Dumb People cultivating Dumb Objects*. The approach of devising these 'strange

places' is a mission aligned to a form of protest because in laboring over 'creative' resources' there is an opportunity of earning a new sense of meaning to collective agency. In transgressing boundaries, there are opportunities to reinvigorated the ethos of a culture based with the intent of sharing it with social agents that are not equal—to the extent that makes us construct new relationships without having to force compassion, or a kind of complicated equity.

HAU is a catalyst for place-making. His project is to cite his ghost's as essential to rethinking value— the value of people, the value of community, and the exponential value of discovering the extraneously creative efforts of a *Live Tradition*. This interest in intangible capital within the 'exchange' of art, emphasizes the experiencing of the non-material elements of the creative act - such as generosity, intimacy, thought-processes - as the 'real' that is in need of redistribution in society. This distribution creates a health for individuals that can contribute real consequential value to the rest of society. Our labour can be protest when building a resistance to our drunken sensitivity to the alluring light of the image. Through the implosion of Act II, the underlying motives for building an uncertainty in the audience was an attempt in squaring away the account of 'giving, receiving, and returning' - even if only in the silent ritual of making art that salutes my *Live Tradition* as being 'heard, acknowledged, and understood.'

Bringing it All Back Home (An Outro)

A condition for which I have attempted, and will continue attempting to remake myself has been thoroughly a process based in creating art. I have found it necessary to trace the experiential, to the deeply personal, to the responsibility of communication, to

illustrate what is most pressing about being an artist. Since my earliest moments of identifying as an artist, a part of my concern has been in correcting delusions of self-knowledge from what turned out to be misinformation. Of course, James Baldwin so poignantly illuminates my concerns on the creative process, in stating that '[The artist] is deeply involved in this delicate and strenuous effort [...] that comes only from having looked on and endured and survived the worst [3].' This is what is compelling about Lewis Hyde's proclamation that an artist works within a live tradition, in respect to the work of artists and thinkers who have come before them and who, in having a deep intellectual relationship with these past forces, benefit and keep alive this 'delicate and strenuous effort.'

Baldwin's call for acceptance and transformation of all the dissonant social forces were the heavy-weighted words I've struggled to grasp in the manifesto-ish declaration of The Wrestling Project - in the refusal to diminish art's potential of granting, on some level, equal dignity to the human experience through creative expression. In the closing moments of his monologue, HAU interjects his rather enigmatic speech with some clarity, stating that to know one's 'ghost makes it so we pack a stronger punch!' I always intended to create more range within myself through the scope of this project, with the intention of capturing it as a document that stands independent but interconnected with all the other elements that intersected in its making. In collapsing the raw immaterial qualities of the inherent rite of passage of this moment, it was to heightened the paths of my personal artistic terrain, meant to signify the gift in my attempt to square away the account. The Wrestling Project was a representation of repressed memories convert into a performative spaces as a physical manifestation, as in the form of building or

place that can be occupy or that occupies - this was my attempt in creating a *Live Tradition*.

Let me venture one last articulation on spectacle that has always been on route through the influence of Guy Debord. The situationist practices of the *dérive* - a playful constructive technique of rapid/random passage through varied urban space - as it makes a difference in a precise delineation of being 'somewhere.' The *dérive* in Situationist practice is meant to bring behavioral awareness of psychogeographical effects of the built environments, in contrast to the passive experience of a journey [15]. The 'letting-go' process of emotionally disorienting oneself to similar surroundings is a lesson on spatial localization where one comes to perceive the principal axes of passage as a method in uncovering hidden pivot points [15]. This process, less in the manner of physical bodies moving through concrete 'space', but more as a method of navigating mental, invisible paths. It is important to cultivate how we traverse the inner terrain that has been built within us: what we find in these hidden landscape where countless voices who have built real estate, intentional or not, that bares some level of causality in thoughts and actions unto the concrete space of the social, of the 'real'.

And there is an inherent inquiry of a rite of passage, when James Baldwin states that 'light somewhere, to know that in oneself, waiting to be found, there is a light [...] what the light reveals is danger, and what it demands is faith [4].' By way of metaphor of an audience sitting in a dark auditorium or arena, the rite of passage is in the act of sitting at a stage as spectator, in a dark arena, with the imminent threat of having the lights switched on and illuminating for all to see. And in this moment we have to see everything for what it is: not only seeing and acknowledging the structure in which we sit

and seeing ourselves positioned on whatever level of this auditorium, but having to live with what that does to us. That is the light and its eviscerating [1] to the spectator because the risks the position of spectatorship itself.

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