

## POSTHUMAN PERFORMANCE

### An Feminist Intervention <sup>1</sup>

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Narcissister posing for *IN\*TANDEM*, 2010.  
Image Credit: Gabriel Magdaleno/*IN\*TANDEM* magazine

Man will be erased like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea.  
—Michel Foucault, 1966

We have never been human.  
—Donna Haraway, 2006

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to dedicate this essay to the participants of my senior seminar “Women Artists, Self-Representations” taught during multiple terms at UC Santa Cruz, particularly my teaching assistant Lulu Meza, as well as students Christina Dinkel, Abby Lawton and Allison Green.

I am grateful to Natalie Loveless and Lissette Olivares for their critical feedback on early drafts of this article. I am also indebted to Donna Haraway and Jennifer González for their mentorship pertaining to the specific issues I explore here.

In spring 2010, New York's Museum of Modern Art hosted a popular and controversial retrospective of Marina Abramović's oeuvre entitled *The Artist is Present*. Abramović herself participated in one seated performance at the exhibition and models were hired to play other roles she had become famous for. The retrospective included "Imponderabilia," in which an unclothed man and woman stand in a doorway. For the first staging in 1977, Abramović and Ulay (Uwe Laysiepen) stood at the show's entrance, in such close proximity that they forced most visitors to enter sideways and touch them both. Part of the work's purpose was to see how the audience would respond to the gendered naked bodies.<sup>2</sup> Audience squirming and forced decision-making were crucial elements of the piece, and are part of why it became so notorious. However, the dynamic of touch was eliminated at the MoMA. The nude individuals in 2010 were placed farther apart than Abramović and Ulay were in the first staging, and sometimes both of the MoMA models were women standing in the doorway. Warnings signs forbade "improper" behavior and visitors were reprimanded if they touched the performers. Several memberships were revoked as a result.<sup>3</sup>



Marina Abramović and Ulay in *Imponderabilia*. Galleria Comunale d'Arte Moderna, Bologna, June 1977.  
 © Marina Abramović. Image Credit: Sean Kelly Gallery, New York (left). Re-performance of *Imponderabilia*.  
 For the Marina Abramović retrospective *The Artist is Present*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York.  
 Image Credit: © Slava Mogutin (right).

The retrospective was the target of criticisms by mainstream news reporters, most rehearsing a popular hostility towards performance art in general. But none questioned the decisions made by Abramović or

<sup>2</sup> Martin Berger pointed out a dilemma it posed for heterosexual men: facing the woman would mean not gazing at the naked man, but at the same time, it would allow one's backside to brush against the man's penis. From "Modern Art in Context," lecture, UC Santa Cruz: June 1, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Claudia La Rocco, "Some at MoMA Show Forget 'Look but Don't Touch.'" (New York: *New York Times*, April 15, 2010). <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/16/arts/design/16public.html>, last accessed April 2011.

the show's curators to depoliticize or domesticate some of the interventions. Nor did it seem strange to reviewers that the museum expected appropriate behavior from visitors who were encountering works that called into question artistic and museological conventions. Indeed, for Western exhibitions since the nineteenth century, there is almost always a break in so-called proper behavior by audiences who encounter transgressive and live displays. This is part of the history of displaying live bodies in the 1800s, and largely the reason for the widespread repression of performance from exhibitions around the year 1900, in order to normalize proper visiting as quiet contemplation and passive edification.<sup>4</sup> It was therefore naïve for the MoMA to expect anything predictable from their visitors in 2010, and especially for Abramović, who once had a loaded gun pointed to her head by a spectator during *Rhythm 0* (1974).

MoMA's handling of "inappropriate" behaviors responding to an "inappropriate" exhibition exposes the serious limitations of re-staging interventions in a major museum according to the logic of the white cube. The approach eliminates both interactivity and potential for social rearticulation by forcing museum passivity onto an oeuvre incompatible with it. Ultimately, the restagings seemed to be reaching towards a canonical or commodifiable status for Abramović at the expense of her interventionism. This essay explores how transgression in performance and exhibitions today provoke interactivities that cannot be fully repressed or ignored, despite any opposition. Rather than acting hostile towards such dynamics, I propose that artists, curators, and other agents should instead anticipate and manipulate them as part of their work's medium. This is a method commonly referred to as interventionism in art that I intend to expand upon. Departing now from Abramović, in what follows I focus on a critical form of transgression to disturb twenty-first century thinking and being: transforming and decentering *the human*. Such an attention enables me to question traditional performance practice organized around the human body, destabilizing categories from within, while also searching for alternative modes of relating and intervening.

Many of us may be familiar with the *posthuman*, a hybrid figure characterized primarily by the merging of human and machine. N. Katherine Hayles has written extensively on the subject matter, particularly in *How We Became Posthuman* (1999).<sup>5</sup> For Hayles and other writers in the 1990s, the posthuman's ontology included a dispersal of information and consciousness through cybernetics. More recently, discourses in posthumanities contribute to the decentering of classical notions of the human, offering a renewed emphasis on the relational or coevolutionary. While the terms *posthuman* and *posthumanities* might at first seem harmoniously related, their discursive histories are divergent and sometimes frictional. Scholars in the posthumanities are actively trying to distinguish themselves from conceptualizations of the posthuman by emphasizing a critique of liberal humanism and an engagement with animal studies.<sup>6</sup> Yet closer inspection reveals that the discourse on the posthuman also centers on a critique of liberal humanism. As Hayles states, "my reference point for the human is the tradition of liberal humanism; the posthuman appears when computation rather than possessive individualism is taken as the ground of being, a move that allows the posthuman to be seamlessly articulated with intelligent machines."<sup>7</sup> Such formations are only available to people and are largely extensions of the liberal human subject rather than fundamental disruptions of it.

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<sup>4</sup> See my forthcoming article on this history, "Interactivity and Displays of Difference in the Nineteenth Century" (tentative title, subject to change). Dissertation chapter currently being prepared for peer-review.

<sup>5</sup> N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1999).

<sup>6</sup> See Donna Haraway's reservations about the term *posthuman* in her interview, "When We Have Never Been Human, What Is to Be Done?" in *Theory Culture Society* Vol. 23(2006): 135–158. See also Rosi Braidotti, "Posthuman, All Too Human: Towards a New Process Ontology." *Theory Culture Society*. Vol. 23 (2006): 197-208.

<sup>7</sup> Hayles: 34.

Posthumanists, on the other hand, place us into radical relationality with other species, with whom we have co-evolved and continue to co-exist. However, there are limitations to posthumanist approaches too, such as the role of politics in Cary Wolfe's recent *What is Posthumanism?* (2009). Theorist Joshua Labare critiques Wolfe's framework, calling his book humanist-posthumanism, and recognizing that it is "a grave oversight on Wolfe's part to ignore the ways that feminist theory, critical race theory, and queer theory have already unsettled and reconfigured the subject. Indeed, these fields and the field of science studies constitute the condition of possibility for animal studies, as much as if not more than poststructuralism and deconstruction do."<sup>8</sup> Posthuman and posthumanist theories both rely on liberal humanism, but more work needs to be done to disrupt this tradition in each of them. Mindful of the desire amongst posthumanists to disidentify with the posthuman, and taking to heart Labare's critique, I propose that we knot the posthuman to other modes of unsettling the subject, such as feminist and postcolonial theories, as well as respectfully calling upon those individuals who have been framed as Others to the human during earlier eras (including freaks and "hybrids"). Such connections will be useful for thinking of the possible futures for being posthuman and posthumanist in ways that are politicized and *post-anthropocentric*, to use Rosi Braidotti's term.<sup>9</sup> As we imagine ourselves not only expanding through technologies but also our relationships with each other and other species, so too must we dismantle humanistic notions of normativity and do away with posthuman single-species determinism. The latter involves the fantasy of leaving the body behind common to theories of the posthuman. I therefore propose the term *posthuman performance* as a critical (oxymoronic) framework that resists any assertion that the posthuman does not need or can transcend organic bodies. The concept agrees with Amelia Jones' call for re-embodiment of the subjects of feminism, "by saturating theory in and with the desiring making, viewing, and interpretive bodies of art theory and practice."<sup>10</sup> I suggest feminists re-embodiment and reclaim the posthuman through performance. Posthuman performance is therefore a type of interventionism that explores relationships and social transformation outside the parameters of liberal humanism, but without ignoring or abjecting the live body.

This essay is decidedly feminist and written against the progressivism of some versions of the posthuman, as well as of avant-garde movements and by extension their manifestos. Rather than conceived of as totally new, the possible futures for posthuman performance are informed by figures from the past, such as the constitutive others of European humanism or reconfigurations of the body articulated in the 1990s, as well as contemporary practices of the last ten years. I begin by revisiting Orlan's work which in many ways became the prototypical embodiment of posthuman performance two decades ago. After Orlan, I discuss examples from contemporary works that I wish to knot to the figure of the posthuman, followed by an exploration of how we may effectively work with "inappropriate" behaviors in response to transgressive posthuman performances.

### **The Posthuman 1990s: Orlan's Surgery Interventions**

In 1990, French artist Orlan disturbed the contemporary art scene by staging her first performance surgery, intending to disrupt the contours of her body ten times during the following three years. Barbara

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<sup>8</sup> Joshua Labare, review of Cary Wolfe's *What is Posthumanism?* In *Science Fiction Film and Television*. Vol 4, No. 1 (Spring 2011): 136-140.

<sup>9</sup> Rosi Braidotti defines feminist post-anthropocentrism as challenging the androcentrism of the post-structuralists' corporeal materialism. Rosi Braidotti, "Posthuman, All Too Human: Towards a New Process Ontology." *Theory Culture Society*. Vol. 23 (2006): 197-208.

<sup>10</sup> Amelia Jones, "Postfeminism, Feminist Pleasures, and Embodied Theories of Art." *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*, edited by Donald Preziosi. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998): 394-395.

Rose wrote in 1993 that Orlan's work gives new meaning to the term *cutting edge* art (deliberately invoking the image of a scalpel).<sup>11</sup> At the time Rose was writing against the grain, as Orlan received preemptive criticism from all ends of the political spectrum. Conservative audiences, which in this case included much of the general public, disliked her unconventional carnivalesque style and did not understand how her work could be called art.<sup>12</sup> To pre-Butlerian feminists with essentialist views of gender and biology, plastic surgery reinforced the objectification of the female body, and therefore these leftists expected Orlan's work to contribute a major social problem. Orlan declared in *Omnipresence* (1993), "I am taking this so far that there will be no ambiguity about that issue."<sup>13</sup> She explained that the plastic surgery would not be used to "improve" her body, but to transform it so as to experience its difference, to desacralize Western medicine, and critique our standards of beauty rather than perpetuate them. Feminists have since accepted Orlan's work as a disturbance of Western beauty standards rather than anti-feminist practice, as Linda Kauffman indicated in 2003.<sup>14</sup>

Orlan intended for her work to build upon and interrogate long-standing presumptions of psychoanalysis, such as taking for granted an essential link between self and body, as well as the boundaries that such a connection can produce.<sup>15</sup> With this in mind, it may not be a surprise that Orlan's sanity was called into question by her audiences throughout the 1990s. The widespread doubt regarding the artist's sanity was indicated when U.S. news anchor Connie Chung covered *Omnipresence* in New York. While Chung attempted an open mind, she had noticeable trouble calling the work "art" and was surprised that Orlan was not worried about the health risks of surgery. The obvious irony of Chung's commentary was that the reporter had undergone eyelid surgery to appear whiter, a more socially acceptable practice as Kauffman suggests.<sup>16</sup> One can therefore deduct that a "sane" surgical practice strives toward some norm or ideal, even if it is racist.

Furthermore, cultural theorists Stallybrass and White explain that the visual imagery of the carnival has been fragmented since the Enlightenment and redistributed across Western imaginaries. The process includes a recurring expression of mental disorder through carnivalesque tropes of the body, such as when hysterics translated psychological expressions to the forms of distorted and changing bodies.<sup>17</sup> Orlan began many of her performances by wearing high-couture and carnivalesque costume – such as in *Opera-*

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<sup>11</sup> Barbara Rose, "Orlan: Is It Art?" *Art in America* 81:2 (February 1993): 83-125.

<sup>12</sup> Apparently one third of her initial audience left just after the surgery began, and only a few remained in the galleries that screened the broadcasts by the end. See Carey Lovelace, "Orlan: Offensive Acts" in *Performing Arts Journal*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (January 1995): 13.

<sup>13</sup> Quotation from Orlan's *Omnipresence* surgery. As documented in the film *Carnal Art* (2001).

<sup>14</sup> Linda Kauffman, "Cutups in Beauty School." In *Interfaces: Women, Autobiography, Image, Performance*, edited by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002): 103-131. Orlan's work inspired a reconsideration of the potential for cosmetic surgery and gender expression, as indicated by Kathy Davis' article on the general applicability of surgery that seems completely opposite of what earlier feminists expected. See Davis, "My Body is My Art: Cosmetic Surgery as Feminist Utopia?" in *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader*. Edited by Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick (New York: Routledge, 1999): 454-465. Perhaps feminists who were once critical of Orlan would appreciate her gifting a bundle of severed flesh to Madonna on a television talk show, after which the French artist stated that the pop icon "said it was like caviar. She probably eats a lot of it, and knows what she's talking about."

<sup>15</sup> From the *Carnal Art* documentary (2001).

<sup>16</sup> Kauffman: 115.

<sup>17</sup> Stallybrass and White refer to cases like Freud's Frau Emmy von N., whose stories render the carnivalesque an "object of cathartic laughter." Stallybrass and White, "Bourgeois Hysteria and the Carnavalesque." In *The Cultural Studies Reader*, edited by Simon During (New York: Routledge, 1999): 285.

*Surgery* (1991) when she paraded in the operating room wearing a tall multi-colored hat and whimsical dress. Her style thus conjured for her audience similar associations to madness because of the visual traditions Stallybrass and White theorize, even if the artist was not aware of them. Dr. Marjorie Kramer, Orlan's feminist surgeon, defended the artist's sanity in an interview featured in the *Carnal Art* (2001) documentary video, stating that she was willing to operate because the artist's intentions were not "masochistic" or "deranged." Following that segment in *Carnal Art* was a video of Orlan questioning the safety of one operation, and ultimately canceling that performance because she did not feel well. Refuting accusations of insanity and masochism are probably the only purpose of fully documenting a canceled performance, indicating how important the issue really was and continues to be.<sup>18</sup> Thus the tropes of carnival, abnormalcy, and madness were all invoked and raised significant questions about Orlan's performances, which she tried to suppress or refute. In the next sections of this essay, I argue that such responses are worth engaging more actively.

Orlan's disruption of the classical, normative, and essentialized female body often generated connections between her art practice and the theoretical work of Donna Haraway. In relation to Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century" first written in 1986 and widely republished thereafter, Orlan is sometimes called an embodiment of the hybrid and monstrous cyborg. But it is an association that the artist seems to welcome over the mad, radically freakish, non-human, or less fashionable figures of abnormality. Both call their work blasphemous.<sup>19</sup> Haraway's manifesto proposed groundwork for a new feminist subject unbound by binaries or essentialisms, and instead enacts a subjectivity that extends and is metonymized outside of the traditional limits of the body. Orlan performed many of these ideas directly, especially when developing her concept of omnipresence through which digital technologies unfurled her consciousness transnationally to various art institutions like the Pompidou Center. In *Omnipresence*, those watching in Paris could see Orlan being operated on in New York, and hear audience members participating from other global locations like Toronto. While bestowing on Orlan a God-like quality, *Omnipresence* also agreed with some of the basic concepts from Haraway's cyborg manifesto because it emphasized an expansion of consciousness that is not imprisoned by any fixed categories of identity.

The connections discussed above seem promising, yet it is important to note how the latter sections of Haraway's essay often go unmentioned in favor of a more trendy and techno-fetishizing vision.<sup>20</sup> This is true to the extent that some scholars seriously misrepresent "A Cyborg Manifesto," such as the misconcep-

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<sup>18</sup> Orlan declared in *Omnipresence* that she did not wish to suffer as a result of the operations, implying that as the producer of her documentary and orchestrator of the artworks, she felt the need to repudiate accusations that she must be careless or insane. Later in the documentary, Orlan stated directly that she does not feel pain during the performances and thus does not intend to be understood as a suffering martyr in the judeo-christian tradition. During a live broadcasting of a surgery, she rejected a theorist's comparison to Vincent Van Gogh's ear self-dismemberment, claiming that her body (not painting) was her medium, and that she was not transforming herself in a moment of madness or despair. Many of the statements throughout the *Carnal Art* documentary insist on the psychological control Orlan had over the performances.

<sup>19</sup> See Donn Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century." In *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1990): 149. See also Alyda Faber, "Saint Orlan: Ritual as Violent Spectacle and Cultural Criticism." In *The Performance Studies Reader*, edited by Henry Bial (New York: Routledge, 2007): 109.

<sup>20</sup> I make this statement based on my own experiences engaging with Haraway's work before becoming her student. Nicholas Gane discusses with Haraway the tendencies to "drop the feminism" in her manifesto in an interview, "When We Have Never Been Human, What Is to Be Done?" in *Theory Culture Society* Vol. 23 (2006): 136.

tion that it argues for the total disappearance of gender or difference.<sup>21</sup> Haraway's emphasis on the strategic alliances formed by women of color feminists is just as, if not more, fundamental to her theory of cyborg feminism as the technological aspects. These are ideas that begin to complicate Orlan's oeuvre in addition to my discussions of the artist's carnivalesque style and her claims to sanity. For example, Haraway foregrounds Chela Sandoval's strategies for women of color who enact coalitions based on affinity rather than identity, characterizing them as cyborg activity and a "potent formulation for feminists out of the world-wide development of anti-colonialist discourse; that is to say, discourse dissolving the 'West' and its highest product – the one who is not animal, barbarian, or woman; man, that is, the author of a cosmos called history. As Orientalism is deconstructed politically and semiotically, the identities of the occident destabilize, including those of feminists."<sup>22</sup> Re-attending to transnational and postcolonial feminism in Haraway's manifesto reveals that it is not cosmetic surgery that is Orlan's core problematic (as some feminists would have previously argued). The underlying "progress" of avant-gardism and European notions of the racialized self/Other are the conditions that make it possible for her to reductively engage with non-Western cultural practices.

Orlan's Orientalism is not adequately theorized as part of her status as a posthuman artist. These problematics are less evident in the surgeries and are much more apparent in her meta-narratives about them, especially in *Carnal Art*, and the subsequent *Self-Hybridization* series for which Orlan digitally transposes her face onto images that supposedly indicate radically different notions of beauty from other civilizations. Her self-hybridizations sometimes approach two-dimensional minstrelsy, especially those series based on non-ancient African (2000-2003) and American Indian (2005-2008) cultures. Images, such as that of the Ejagha headdress that is appropriated for one of Orlan's *Self-Hybridizations*, take for granted the static and visual aspects of such an object not meant to be seen predominantly in stasis. Elisabeth Cameron explains that, "by themselves they [photos of African masks] do not communicate either the movement and meaning—and the sheer wonder and fun—of a performance, or the interplay between men and women, masked and unmasked."<sup>23</sup> Orlan's digital adaptations naturalize a Western tendency to devalue or ignore performances by fetishizing visual form according to European art standards. In these ways, the post-surgery images are similar to works by modernist avant-garde artists who have mined so-called primitive cultures for artistic inspiration, like Picasso, Gauguin, and countless others. Orlan treads on thin ice with her later projects, threatening to undermine the efficacy of her earlier works during which she did not engage racial and cultural differences quite so flippantly. These images are not attempts at feminist strategic alliance. Orlan cites recent or contemporary non-Western peoples who practice various forms of body modification in *Carnal Art*, but too often she frames them as examples of past cultural practices and denies their coevalness.<sup>24</sup> Thus she reinscribes non-Western cultures as "primitive" in a cultural-aesthetic (and aestheticized) hierarchy traceable to the beginnings of European humanism and modernism.

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<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Ken Gonzales-Day, "Choloborg; or, The Disappearing Latino Body." In *Art Journal*, Vol. 60, No. 1 (Spring, 2001): 23 and 26. Gonzales-Day actually claims that Haraway argues for the disappearance of gender and that she does address race in her manifesto. To clarify, Haraway is not arguing for the disappearance of gender, but for the unfixing of social identity categories and for coalition building that is inspired by women of color feminists with a strong commitment to anti-racism.

<sup>22</sup> Haraway (1990): 156.

<sup>23</sup> Elisabeth Cameron, "Men Portraying Women: Representations in African Masks." *African Arts*, Vol. 31, No. 2(Spring, 1998):72-79.

<sup>24</sup> As Johannes Fabian writes, supposedly primitive or exotic non-Westerners come to represent past stages of human evolution paradoxically in the present. See Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

I consider Orlan's works to be groundbreaking as they continue to provoke uncanny responses twenty years after they were first staged.<sup>25</sup> Even if I do grow uncomfortable when she talks about the Maya, her work nonetheless has come to represent ideas about posthuman art and technology that persisted for an entire decade. But to avoid repeating Orlan's mistakes, I turn again to Haraway, who has more recently theorized companion species and other ways of relating between different beings, recasting the cyborg as but one figure in a web of many other types of relationships.<sup>26</sup> With Haraway, we can see how the cyborg or posthuman might not only exist as a single species connected to and expanding with inorganic materials, but also important are our interactions with other living and non-living things. Haraway's work decenters the human from all directions, and troubles what was posed as the fantasy of "pure decision" that some progress-oriented narratives of cybernetics would have us believe is possible, and was applied to Orlan's and Stelarc's work by Jane Goodall.<sup>27</sup> By now, artists and theorists have been expanding and violating the human beyond posthuman parameters of the 1990s, meriting a further exploration of examples from the last ten years that may present to us other ways to act as ethical posthumans. Of particular interest to the remaining sections of this article are performers who complicate the limits of the human, but also decenter white human exceptionalism and determinism by emphasizing relationality in terms of technology, the carnivalesque, animality, body modification, and madness. I knot them together under the category of *posthuman performance* in an attempt to synthesize the productive contributions of both posthuman and posthumanist theories, and to insist on a radical politics and relationality for this type of practice. The category is therefore not exhaustive or limiting, nor is it faithful to either discourse. Instead the concept is a point of intersection for possibilities in discourse and being.

### Contemporary Interventions

In *Destination Culture* (1998) Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett observes that displays of people always enact a "semiotic seesaw" between opposing meanings, such as animal/human, self/Other, and living/dead.<sup>28</sup> This dynamic is a legacy that persists in exhibitions, despite the suppression of histories that recall how people were exhibited in the West since the early nineteenth century. Most of the persons who performed at that time were framed as cultural exotics or as freaks, which Rosemarie Garland-Thomson says allowed the audience to formulate the normative human in relation to what it was not.<sup>29</sup> As such, they functioned as constitutive others to the liberal human and contributed to its normalization. By the twentieth century, these displays were banished from the exhibitionary circuit due to a combination of city laws pertaining to "decency" and massive opposition from museum professionals.<sup>30</sup> The reintroduction of live performance

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<sup>25</sup> I screen the *Carnal Art* documentary in various classes and am always struck by the unexpected responses from my students, such as squirming, covering of the eyes, leaving the room, and even nausea.

<sup>26</sup> Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto*. (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003):4.

<sup>27</sup> Jane Goodall, "An Order of Pure Decision: Un-Natural Selection in the Work of Stelarc and Orlan." In *Body & Society* Vol. 5 No. 2-3 (June 1999): 149-170.

<sup>28</sup> Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998): 34-47.

<sup>29</sup> Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996): 59.

<sup>30</sup> See my forthcoming article on this history, "Interactivity and Displays of Difference in the Nineteenth Century" (tentative title, subject to change). See also Susan Schweik, *The Ugly Laws: Disability in Public* (New York: NYU Press, 2009).

in the museum did not occur in the exhibitionary circuit until many decades later.<sup>31</sup> I am particularly interested in artists who not only engage the body and performance in their works, but whose works call upon the nineteenth century displays and provoke similar interactivities while inverting the power play in order to disrupt traditional constructs of “the human.”

Narcissister is one such performer. The image that appears on the first page of this essay features her in full costume, posing with an artificially reconfigured body that has two tall imposing heads and hybridized Victorian-Asian style clothing. Prosthetic elements of her costume include the heads as well as the exposed breasts that are inconsistent shades of flesh. As an organic-inorganic monstrosity, Narcissister’s abnormal corpus is ambiguous and resists any fixed social categories like “the individual,” racial categories, and even essentialized notions of gender, considering all parts that might signify femininity are inorganic (including her breasts) and metonymic. Narcissister is a classically trained dancer whose works range from proscenium performances (usually dances), to film, to situational interactive works. Her trademark is the use of mannequin parts, and particularly an ethnically-ambiguous mask. Thus her performances always enact a hybridization and enlivening of plasticity – plasticity in terms of both art and of mannequin – while the person underneath remains mysterious in terms of gender, race, and authorship. The shadowy third head appearing in the first image metaphorizes a lack of an essential identity or core to her performances: how we read her body depends on our recognition of signs related to race, gender, and corporeal normativity, but any essence remains mysterious, anonymous, shadowy, a negativity.

Narcissister’s prostheses such as her masks deflect a panoptic gaze while maintaining an ambivalent relationship to the Mulveyan *phallogocentric gaze*, in that a viewer may objectify the performer, but not entirely so, especially not her subjectivity due to the constant obfuscation of her eyes (the body part most often associated with mind or consciousness in Western traditions). Her work has been described as “expert use of self-generated media [that] portend a black female subjectivity that challenges the fixed meanings of race, gender and sexuality. Her glittering accoutrements – larger than life hair, the assortment of baubles she pulls from bodily orifices, as well as the striking mask she wears during each show serve to enhance her simulacral play with gender, signifiers and spectacle.”<sup>32</sup> Narcissister shows us through the use of prosthetics that the posthuman need not be exclusively cybernetic, as she just as effectively expands through the enlivening of non-digital body parts. Instead, her posthuman performance relies on metonymic and relational expansionism.

Indeed, sometimes we may not be sure if it is the same person performing the role. The remarkably evocative image and accompanying film of the double-headed Narcissister embodies what Ariel Osterweis Scott observes about the multi-layered “semiotic seesaw” of Narcissister: “she is Barbie, she is suicide bomber; she is singular, she is many; she is Mammy, she is Marie Antoinette; she is black, she is white; she is humiliated, she is authoritative; she is punk, she is hip-hop; she is human, she is animal; she is body, she is mind. Ultimately, she asks us what it means to decapitate and devour our own heads...a question we can only answer with a curtsy.”<sup>33</sup> Respectful to Scott’s keen observations, we might disagree that a curtsy is the only possible response to such a multiplicity and violation of the human, of individualism and traditional consciousness. Instead, the response might be just as conflicted, echoing how Leslie Fiedler has de-

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<sup>31</sup> In the 1960s and 70s, performance artists presented their bodies and processes as mediums for their work, often to critique the institutional practices that produced the “dead” space of the museum. Performance did not “return” to the museum until the 1980s.

<sup>32</sup> Conference program for “Race Reveal: Racialized Tropes, Queer Performance, Political Possibilities,” UC Berkeley, October 2010. <http://crg.berkeley.edu/content/race-reveal>.

<sup>33</sup> Ariel Osterweis Scott, statement for Narcissister’s “This Masquerade.” Abrons Art Center, February 2011..

scribed encountering a freak or exotic “Other,” where one might feel the simultaneous sensation of identification and disidentification.<sup>34</sup> Perhaps the silent response that Scott describes is all that is possible when Narcissister performs on the proscenium stage. But in more interactive arenas, such as the museum or on the street, I suggest that the stakes would be quite different and possibly more radical. Recently, Narcissister has begun a quite brilliant project of expanding her prostheticized body through the participation of multiple performers, marked by a common mask, allowing for variable interruptions of the classical or normative body. While this project, entitled “Narcissister is You,” has thus far only involved others taking photographs with the mask, the artist may consider performative contributions that disrupt self/other relationships of race, gender, and so on, unraveling the threads of relating and selfhood that are wound so tightly around the normative human in the liberal humanist tradition.



Violeta Luna and Hector Zavala in *Corpo/Ilicito: The Post-Human Society 6.9*. CounterPULSE, San Francisco, 2009. Image Credit: La Pocha Nostra.

The self-proclaimed “experimental sideshow” performances of *La Pocha Nostra* also interrogate the roles of posthuman or techno-subjects in nationalist, racialized, and gendered discourses. *La Pocha* contributors, which include a core troupe that collaborates with artists transnationally, have written important manifestos that are very much in line with what I propose to be posthuman performance in this article.<sup>35</sup> Particularly important are their construction of “ethno-cyborgs,” as opposed to characters, and “living dioramas” as opposed to the proscenium theatre – both rearticulations of traditional western theatrical structures. These performance models interrogate traditional divisions between actor/character, actor/audience, stage/seating, and are potentially more interactive. *La Pocha*’s structural transformations of theatrical conventions are not new, as so-called modernist avant-garde movements have attempted to change them for decades. However, *La Pocha* collaborators do not ignore the influences of both minoritarian subjects and intercultural histories that are still regularly erased from (or devalued in) the histories of performance art

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<sup>34</sup> Leslie Fiedler, *Tyranny of the Normal: Essays on Bioethics, Theology & Myth* (Boston: David R Godine, 1996): 147. See also Leslie Fiedler, “Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self,” in *The Tyranny of the Normal*, ed. Sheryl Buckley and Carol C. Donley (Kent: Kent State University Press, 1995): 26

<sup>35</sup> See [http://www.pochanostra.com/downloads/pocha\\_manifesto.doc](http://www.pochanostra.com/downloads/pocha_manifesto.doc), last accessed April 2011

and avant-gardism.<sup>36</sup> Unlike Orlan, the troupe does not consider comprehensibility or sanity to be a necessarily desirable outcome of their works. In fact, indecipherability is sometimes used strategically by the artists, to provoke audience curiosity, and also to protect themselves from any foreclosing descriptions of what they are doing. As such, we might call their work *refractory art*, a term coined by Nelly Richard for works that function “as a ‘tenacious negation’ and as a ‘deviation from a route that preceded’ it.”<sup>37</sup>

La Pocha Nostra performances very often include old video footage of non-Westerners who were appropriated by Europeans and Euro-Americans, and these twentieth century films maintained much of the nineteenth century visual language that framed people who performed in exhibitions as exotic. Through live interactive performances and technological enhancements, images from previous displays of nonwestern peoples are interrogated and transformed. Such is the case in the performance series entitled *Corpo/Ilicito: The Post-Human Society*. The stunning action “6.9” featured an ensemble of performers donned in costumes related to military and technological violence, indigenous hybridized accoutrements, and who engaged with each other in speechless, almost disembodied power-plays, in proximity to a looping projection of old racist films. Cross-species promiscuities were suggested by hybridizing costume, such as a swine mask, as well as the ceremonial feeding of a banana to Gómez-Peña.<sup>38</sup> The latter gesture recalls his previous invocation of this offering in the 1992-3 performance *Two Undiscovered Amerindians*, and its associations with monkeys and the jungle (and by extension “primitive” humans as older exhibitions of live persons would have suggested). Of course, invisible to our liberal-humanist trained eyes will be the many microbes that keep each performer alive and are already on stage with them. *Corpo/Ilicito* interweaves both posthuman and posthumanist figures, all while invoking legacies of racism, violence, nakedness, and incomprehensibility knotted to performances of the “illicit” body throughout history. Gómez-Peña contributed spoken word mantras at irregular moments in the piece, combining the figure of the preacher with the prophet and illicit freakery that gesture towards posthuman futures with a responsibility to the past, mapping new and dynamic subject-positions for marginalized peoples.

Gómez-Peña offered similarly blasphemous preaching in the Argentina performance *Mapa/Corpo 2: Interactive Rituals for the New Millennium* (2007). The work was a “poetic interactive ritual” intended to explore “neo-colonization/de-colonization through acupuncture and the reenactment of the post-9/11 ‘body politic.’”<sup>39</sup> As an audience member for this work, I found the approach to be fascinating, but the production elements to be somewhat limiting in terms of audience participation. *La Pocha Nostra* often states that their performances are intended to be interactive. Yet they do sometimes reproduce the boundaries of the proscenium stage, which encourages viewer passivity. This was my experience at *Mapa/Corpo 2*. It felt like an open-theatre but the stark darkness of the main floor coupled with dramatic stage lighting that shone upon each member of the performance troupe suggested visible boundaries between actor and performer. These stage elements may have seemed desirable for the producers to ensure a structure for the event, but may have inhibited possibilities for posthuman interactivity. Indeed, audience engagement with the per-

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<sup>36</sup> Roselee Goldberg, who frames the Futurists as the first performance artists. See Goldberg, *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2001). Coco Fusco challenges this genealogy by insisting we also acknowledge the centuries of people who were put on display before European artists arrived at performance art in their practice. See Coco Fusco, “The Other History of Cultural Performance.” In *English is Broken Here: Notes on Cultural Fusion in the Americas*. (New York: The New Press, 1995): 37-64.

<sup>37</sup> Inspired by Walter Benjamin, theorist Nelly Richard uses the term refractory to describe a type of art that emerged during the Chilean Pinochet dictatorship. It is a type of artistic practice that attempts to be completely useless for the purposes of fascism or totalitarian systems.

<sup>38</sup> I see this as an opening in the performances, rather than an example of multi-species collaboration. We might imagine how La Pocha’s interventions might play out if they involve other species beyond those that make up “individual” human bodies.

<sup>39</sup> Description for *Mapa/Corpo 2*, <http://hidvl.nyu.edu/video/000549498.html>, last accessed April 2011.

formers was limited to walking around mini-stages of light framed by darkness, and the extracting of nation-marked acupuncture flags when directed. During the event, I wondered about the possibilities of the project if it had taken place in a gallery or alternative space that does not conform to proscenium divisions, less bound by theatrical duration and lighting, and allowing for more unexpected engagements.

Thus far I have turned to Narcissister and *La Pocha Nostra* for models that complicate existing expressions of the posthuman with anti-racist and historically engaged practices. The actors in such performances disrupt the normalized white human, but, nonetheless, for the most part all the actors remain human. Keeping theories from the posthumanities also in mind, we might imagine what those performers might accomplish by engaging non-human species in their work as well. Thinking of performances that already engage with non-human species, there are many examples – far too many for a project of this scope. Rachel Rosenthal immediately comes to mind as an artist who has worked with animals since the 1970s. Non-abusive techniques from the circus may also be of interest. In looking to recent examples that may contribute to the practice I am calling posthuman performance, I am particularly drawn to projects like Basia Irland's *Hydrolibros* and *Ice Books* (2008), the latter which suggest an “ecological language” in sculpted frozen river water. The *Ice Books* melt, sprout, and nurture non-human life in the gallery space.<sup>40</sup> In a project such as this, the species performing are of an entirely different biological kingdom (and phylum if it attracts insects), directed by a human but with an understanding that one is not in total control of the process. Indeed, the work complicates a definition of what can count as performance because it is not a human who is staged in this ephemeral and transformative type of bio art in the gallery. Irland describes her process, “I work with stream ecologists, biologists, and botanists to ascertain the best seeds for each specific riparian zone. When the plants regenerate and grow along the bank, they help sequester carbon, hold the banks in place, and provide shelter for riverside creatures.”<sup>41</sup> Irland's sprouts are therefore intended to participate in relations with other species in and out of traditional art contexts. Indeed, by bringing plants and perhaps other species into the museum and gallery, she disrupts the usual rules of inside/outside where humans are normally the only beings allowed into these spaces. She describes the process of her work in and out of the space of exhibition, “at eye level, on a metal grate above a trough, an Ice Book is placed and allowed to melt during the opening. After a week or so the seeds released into the trough during the melt, sprout in the water provided by the ice, creating a micro-ecosystem in the gallery. The sprouts are then taken to the river to float downstream, completing a cycle.”<sup>42</sup> For Irland, neither the art exhibition nor a permanent collection is the final destination for her work. Instead, these sites are but one point on an itinerary for traveling beings who not only engage with us, but are destined to travel much farther with the facilitation of Irland and several of her audience members.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Donna Haraway introduced me to Irland's work in May 2010.

<sup>41</sup> See <http://www.basaiirland.com/recent-projects/ice-books.html>, last accessed April 2011.

<sup>42</sup> From artist's website, <http://www.basaiirland.com/recent-projects/ice-books.html>, last accessed April 2011.

<sup>43</sup> Irland's website states, “In June 2009, after showing the receding/reseeding video documentary at the Albuquerque Museum, about sixty participants boarded a bus and arrived at the Rio Grande to witness and help launch eleven Ice Books.” <http://www.basaiirland.com/recent-projects/ice-books.html>, last accessed April 2011.



Basia Irland, *Ice Books: Receding/Reseeding* with photos, video, seed packets, trough with remains of ice book (installation shot, left), detail of the ice book remains sprouting in the installation (right), 2008. Image Credit: Basia Irland.

In related projects, the Critical Art Ensemble (CAE) with other artists such as Beatriz da Costa and Shyh-shiun Shyu have developed interventions such as *Free Range Grain* (2003-4) that stage non-human performances in the gallery space, as well as the omnipresent transmissions of participants outside of the gallery. CAE calls the work “a live, performative action. CAE/da Costa/Shyu has constructed a portable, public lab to test foods for the more common genetic modifications. People bring us foods that they find suspect for whatever reason, and we test them over a 72-hour period to see if their suspicions are justified. While we will not be able to say conclusively that a given food is genetically modified (although we can offer strong probability as whether it is), we can test for conclusive negatives, and we can bring issues of food purity into the realm of public discourse.”<sup>44</sup> Process-based works like *Free Range Grain* incorporate posthuman articulations between people and technologies, with posthumanist interest in our relationships to other species. In this case, the point of interest is uncovering whether or not humans were involved in the engineering of our food sources, as well as the ethical problems that surround this type of relationship. We might imagine the other possibilities for engaging with multi-species posthuman performance that involve both digital interactivities and non-human species as integral to the work.

This section has cited only a few selections that build upon and trouble posthuman and posthumanist critiques of liberal humanism, also contributing strategies and a politics to what I call posthuman performance. There are many other art practices that deserve recognition than this essay has room to discuss at length. They include Mudi Yahaya's *Nigerian Hottentot Series*, Coco Rico's multi-species interventions, Renée Cox and Lyle Harris' *Venus Hottentot 2000*, Jennifer Miller's continuing sideshow performances (with her colleagues who perform at Coney Island), as well as many others. Most of the examples I have discussed could be enhanced by foregrounding interactivity and intersubjectivity as part of the work's medium, or being staged in non-proscenium environments. These are the qualities of *La Pocha Nostra's* work that Samira Kawash was attuned to in 1999, in a review of Gómez-Peña and Roberto Sifuentes collaborations for *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*. Kawash explains that the “innovative form” of Gomez-Peña and *La Pocha Nostra's* performance work, in “its multiple incarnations on radio, Internet, museum, and street—introduces an element that has more recently drawn attention in a variety of cultural locations: interactivity.”<sup>45</sup> The final section explores how to work with such interactivities as a fundamental aspect of posthuman performance.

<sup>44</sup> <http://www.critical-art.net/FRG.html>, last accessed April 2011.

<sup>45</sup> Samira Kawash, “Interactivity and vulnerability.” In *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*, Vol. 21, No. (January 1999): 47.

## Manifesting Posthuman Performance

Nicolas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics* (2002) was a formidable attempt to theorize interactivity in contemporary art. He intended to make sense of art practices that dominated the 1990s, which tended to anticipate audience engagements as part of the works. The text has been the topic of great debate in the first decade of the twenty-first century. While Bourriaud's theories have gained widespread attention, theorists like Amelia Jones have reminded us that feminists were already talking about the same intersubjective ideas for many decades and with more nuance.<sup>46</sup> Alexander Garcia Duttman has gone so far as to say that Bourriaud's theory engenders a kind of death of art.<sup>47</sup> Informed by the relational aesthetics debates, I am reminded of the histories of displaying people since modern exhibitionary practices were developed in the nineteenth century. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's "semiotic seesaw" as well as the Othering practices outlined by Garland-Thompson both reveal how perceived transgressions of "the human" have provoked interactivities in exhibitions since the beginnings liberal humanism. Such behavior is still observable in a number of institutions, across disciplines, and even in human evolution exhibitions across the United States.<sup>48</sup> How might these anti-humanist "relational aesthetics" inform current practices?

Performances that violate the classical human as defined by liberal humanism continue to provoke performativities that are also discussed in Coco Fusco's "The Other History of Intercultural Performance" (1993). The article was a critical reflection of her famous collaborative performance-installation piece *Two Undiscovered Amerindians* produced with Gomez-Peña, and the artists' interest in histories of exhibiting people since the earliest colonial encounters.<sup>49</sup> During Fusco and Gomez-Peña's performances, the artists noticed that their ambiguous status as animal/human, primitive/contemporary, (non-)Western, and racially unidentifiable generated uncanny responses from their audience, ranging anywhere from guilty crying, to eager touching, to arrogant statements enforcing racial hierarchy.

These interactivities that are built into performances that disrupt white human exceptionalism are what made possible Fusco's notion of *reverse ethnography*, or the studying of the audience by the performer. At the time, Fusco introduced her innovative concept as a fascinating way to observe actions by the public that are unusual, surprising, and go mostly undocumented. While Bourriaud's ideas do suggest an interest in audience, the "relational" for him tends to emphasize artist intention and participatory agreement,

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<sup>46</sup> Amelia Jones, "Rupture / Erotic Ethics and the Broken Body." Presentation for the panel, *Means to Activism: Unbearable Acts, Relational Aesthetics and Hyperbolic Liveness*. Performance Studies International #12 at Queen Mary, University of London. June 15, 2006.

<sup>47</sup> As argued in Garcia Duttman's keynote lecture entitled "Cultures of the Contemporary," presented at the conference *Culture After Postmodern Culture*, UC Irvine, October 9 2010. It is true that relational aesthetics, as theorized by Bourriaud, is rather depoliticized save for a somewhat orthodox Marxist understanding of social relationships through objects. Claire Bishop criticized Bourriaud by pointing out how he ignores the possibilities of antagonism as a type of engagement, revealed especially in the types of artists Bourriaud conspicuously ignored in his book. See Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," October, Vol. 110 (Autumn, 2004): 51-79. Bishop's discussions draw from Chantal Mouffe's theories of democracy. However effective Bishop is at pointing out Bourriaud's shortcomings, Natalie Loveless reminds us that Mouffe's theories were ultimately about *agonism*, for which antagonism was a key dialectical element to be "worked through" in the process of sublation that is democratic participation. See Natalie Loveless, "Acts of Pedagogy: Feminism, Psychoanalysis, Art and Ethics." Doctoral Dissertation, History of Consciousness department, University of California, Santa Cruz (2010).

<sup>48</sup> I study such practices in my paper "Celebrity Skeletons, Ape-Humans In-Situ, and People On Display in Three Human Evolution Exhibitions." Presented at the UC Santa Cruz science studies conference *Bio[X]* in February 2007. The full-length version is currently being prepared for peer-review.

<sup>49</sup> As one of the earliest attempts to rehabilitate this history, I consider her essay to be somewhat under-researched. Therefore I understand Fusco's essay as a call to write more nuanced and critical accounts of these practices now largely suppressed from cultural memory. Coco Fusco, "The Other History of Cultural Performance." In *English is Broken Here Notes on Cultural Fusion in the Americas*. (New York: The New Press, 1995): 37-64.

while downplaying art world elitism. To contrast, Fusco's reverse ethnography lays the groundwork for a methodology of actual "open-ended" or non-teleological engagement in the space of performance or exhibition. In other words, Fusco's concept of reverse ethnography is open to unexpected and problematic encounters and is thus more dynamic and historically informed than Bourriaud's theory. But even she does not go far enough for my purposes, as her approach only observes such responses. The core proposal of this essay is for performers anticipate spectator reactions to posthuman performances in deliberate violation of the human, and to consider such interactions to be part of the medium of the work that seeks to establish and manipulate radical relationalities. These relationships include responses to the display of 'abnormal' humans, as well as those involving non-human species. Indeed, by mobilizing our knowledges of alternative exhibition histories and building further on Fusco's ideas, we can experiment with transformational or hybrid models for staging posthuman performance and the interactivities they provoke. Such practices will strategically transform audience engagements as part of the work, rather seeing them as by-products or symbolic fulfillments of an artist or curator's expectation. Including such relationality in the frame of posthuman performance, all subjects are presumed to be directly engaged with another being that is in some way not (fully) human in the liberal humanist senses, either by being denied full access to the category or because it is another species. By making these performances immediately responsive to the audience, they further contribute to a non-anthropocentric posthuman/ism by denying anyone who is present access to a stable category of "the human."

Providing new ways to recognize "humanity" is almost always coupled with the abjection of other groups. Therefore, posthuman performances will reject the category of the human outright, insisting that we do not need it in order to act responsibly or to treat any being with dignity. Indeed, posthuman performance will instead reclaim the "monstrosity" that was projected onto a range of peoples in the 19C, whom modern artists and museum practitioners have repeatedly defined themselves against.<sup>50</sup> Here we approach the end/s of this essay by returning once again to the Abramović retrospective, to imagine how it may have manifested as a radical intervention if different decisions were made. As is apparent in various photos of the show, many of the models chosen to stand in the doorway for *Imponderabilia* (2010) conformed to white American beauty standards. With the extra space between the models, the performance was less challenging for visitors and the primary form of interactivity was sexualization. But how could this be unexpected based on the choices made? Imagine instead if the interventionism of *Imponderabilia* was not domesticated for the museum, but instead further radicalized to include posthuman performers in the doorway – such as casting performers who were abnormal, feminist, ethno-cyborgs, and even non-humans. What if a visitor was forced to physically grapple with a two-headed Narcissister by brushing up against her, or a bearded lady, a mad freak, or an illicit ethno-cyborg in order to proceed into the gallery beyond? The proximity and radical relating in this imaginary transformation of *Imponderabilia* metaphorizes the pressing questions that artists and curators must now address. To engender a new era of exhibition and performance that liberates us from institutions like the museum that interpellate us through fixed identities, we must contend with the figures of posthuman performance to arrive at the mysterious realms of possibility for radical relationality in the galleries beyond. Here identified, the tools for such praxis are readily available.

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<sup>50</sup> Such as calling upon Hortense Spillers' work on the symbolic assaults that black women face in the United States, particularly her conclusion of the important essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." In *Black, White and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003): 223.