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April 27, 2008

Consenting Bodies: Through and Beyond Performative Installation

"An object is not an object, it is the witness to a relationship."
-Cecilia Vicuña, *quipoem*

Chilean woman artist Cecilia Vicuña's work succeeds in making objects more than themselves. I have similar aspirations for my own work, which uses objects as stand-ins for the human body and encourages the audience to participate in gallery installations through touch. I believe that the objects that I make gain meaning only through human interaction with them, beyond them, and through associations. On their own, they have little inherent value, significance, or importance; it is only in the way that we relate to and beyond them that they gain meaning.

Vicuña left Chile as an exile during the rise of the Pinochet regime. Her work always seems to hearken back to this moment of departure, an emotionally charged time where she lost her homeland and community because of political factors that she seemingly could not control. Once Vicuña arrived in New York City she collected natural and man made objects and combined them into "sculptural interventions" she called *precarios* or *resistance objects*.[1] These objects are small and poetic. Held together with bits of twine or thread, always handsewn, they seem to be on the edge of disappearing, breaking down into their component parts of sticks, stones, feathers, leaves, and found fabric scraps. Vicuña left many of these *precarios* on the streets of New York, where the city's street cleaners would float them away with the trash or, presumably, someone would pick them up, saving them like a strange gift from some unknown source.[2]

At all stages Vicuña's work connects to the human experience. Her raw materials are found objects discarded by society: whether they are manmade or natural it is clear that before she "discovered" them they were useless and unwanted. Through a transformative process of artmaking Vicuña translates this refuse into something at once precious and precarious, desirable and deteriorating. She connects this creative process to magic and indigenous Andean spell casting. Upon encountering this work it becomes clear that it is special and secretive, quiet and powerful. Vicuña says that it is "esthetically . . . as beautiful as [it] can be to comfort the soul and give strength" to sustain resistance to the Pinochet dictatorship and other oppressive political forces.[3]

This work is vast, opening up to us as an audience through layers of meaning. Though Vicuña makes objects, her work must always be more than that for her raw materials are objects that we have always already given a meaning and a place. By re-determining and re-locating these objects in our everyday spaces and political experiences Vicuña turns the object into the "witness to a relationship" between herself and the environment, between the audience and the political

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[1] *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, 312.
[2] Cecilia Vicuña, *The Precarious/Quipoem*.
[3] quoted in Lucy R. Lippard's "Spinning the Common Thread" in *The Precarious/Quipoem*, 14.

leader, between ourselves and our communities. I seek a similar engagement through my interactive object-based work.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF OBJECTHOOD AND ART IN THE EARLY TO MID-20TH CENTURY

My perspective on art objects stands in sharp opposition to modernist understandings of the role of the object and the artist in creative dialogue. The modernist ideal of objecthood upheld the notion that through creative practice an artist could imbue an object with some essential truth about the human condition. Modernist artists felt that this truth would be accessible to everyone because of its universality. Women, people of color, and the queer community began to question modernism's universality when it became clear that the purveyors of this master narrative were limited to straight white men at the top of the art world's sales. This core group of modernist artists was having conversations that were more and more inward looking, addressing issues in their artwork that they claimed would be accessible to anyone who looked. In fact, the dialogue within the Art World was becoming so convoluted and self-referential that only those who had the privilege to be a part of it from the beginning or buy their way in as collectors (patrons) could truly participate and understand.

As the relationship between creativity and the marketplace solidified into a capitalistic structure centered in the New York gallery system, a movement of post-modernism began to crystallize among collectives of artists that rejected the elitism of grand individualism, essential truths, and universal visions of objecthood. The artistic wings of the feminist and black liberation movements of the 1960s and 70s had their roots in this post-modernism and its denial of art's ability to express an essential truth that was universally representational. Artists began working outside the gallery context with street art, temporary site-specific installations, earthworks, and performances, forms that replaced the centrality of objecthood with public spectacles, place-based responses, and live bodies. These alternative media, to a certain extent, denied commodification by the Art World through their transience and encouraged the development of art communities by those who had previously been excluded from this system. Collective actions in particular brought social and political concerns to the forefront, collapsed the binary of art and life, and, though they used artistic discourses and signifiers, often located themselves in a wider social context rather than an artistic one. [4] This art, in contrast to the directions modernism was increasingly taking in the 1960s and 70s towards minimalism, was outward looking and seriously engaged with social issues like gender discrimination, racism, and homophobia.

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[4] I would argue that artistic collectives have taken much from the women's liberation movement (and, for that matter, the black liberation movement, the Chicano movement, the American Indian Movement, etc.) of the 1970s. The mere notion of collaboration and a process-based methodology runs counter to a patriarchal understanding of the artist as a pure (masculine and white) mind that is destroyed by the infiltration of outside influences. Feminist artists of the 1970s such as Suzanne Lacy and Marina Abramovic have identified collaboration as a female-gendered form. Because collaboration rejects the grand immortalized gesture of individualism in favor of the power of the collective it is automatically difficult to classify within the gallery system of art world economics. For me, the most powerful form of feminist/radical social change still being enacted through the art making process is found in collective actions.

DUCHAMP AS ARTISTIC REVOLUTIONARY

Although Marcel Duchamp lived and worked during the height of modernism, many of his ideas transgress his era and set the stage for later developments in modernism and beyond. Duchamp's readymades are, perhaps, the most significant art historical reference point for the re-conceptualization of objecthood and conceptual art itself.[5] In the context of the art that was being exhibited in 1917 when Duchamp showed his *Fountain*, this work was completely radical in its rejection of pictorialism, its questioning of the burgeoning modernist ideal of authorship and originality, and its equation of everyday objects to artworks. Duchamp's act of placing his signature—or, rather, the signature of one of his assumed identities, Richard Mutt—on a urinal, converted the banal, factory made item into an art object. Although the urinal was, in essence, nothing more than a urinal with Duchamp's addition of the signature, reorientation, and placement on a gallery pedestal, this recontextualization did (and does) alter the meaning of the object and, perhaps more significantly, open up art to possibilities beyond easel painting. Ultimately, *Fountain* and the later readymades cemented Duchamp as one of the founders of an art based in ideas rather than formal qualities.

This conceptual basis for art is something I have always made use of: I begin my work with ideas and work out from there. This strategy is particularly important to me because I feel strongly that my art should be engaged with a world beyond itself. As a political activist, making art for art's sake has always seemed like a waste,[6] so when I make something I begin with ideas or content. In connecting my art to my activism, I want to be a part of the creation of structures—both physical and mental—that enable meaningful social change. This semester I decided to focus my body of work on the idea of *consenting bodies*. This content bridges the personal and the political through its activation of objects, spaces, and living bodies.

This approach to objects that I described above has informed the way I see the work I do. Rather than focus on the objects as independent sculptures, I see them as a complete experience based in the establishment of a space that will activate the performative. I will define this further below, but essentially the performative is a way of placing value in the active moments of making and reception rather than on objects themselves, thereby de-emphasizing static meaning and breaking down barriers between art and audience.

CONSENTING BODIES (IN THE WORLD)

The conceptual foundation for this body of work is the idea of consent. As I define it in the context of this body of work, consent is a politicized consciousness that results in an action of the body. Consent is both knowing and doing; one without the other is not enough. This entails both a mental and a physical responsibility for one's desires and behaviors in the world because relationships of consent are based in respect, especially respect for shared needs and desires.

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[5] I would argue that even beyond initiating dialogue in the art world about conceptualism and modernist objecthood Duchamp's readymades begin a conversation about the *performative* by questioning the role of the artist in the development of a work of art and embedding the meaning of artwork within the fabric of society. This dialogue continued with Alan Kaprow and John Cage's Happenings in the 1940s and 50s, and further with the emergence of street theater and performance art in the 60s and 70s.

[6] I see art for art's sake as a waste of time because of the incredible potential for art to affect people to think about their lives and life possibilities in a different way when content is emphasized. Ecologically it is also, in a sense, a waste of materials that come from Earth's limited resources.

Ultimately it is not just consent that I am interested in, but the relationships with others that develop out of this conscious action. My understanding of consent, with its connections between desire and conscious action that affects others in the world, is loosely based in sexual assault prevention and advocacy, the Buddhist understanding of interconnectedness, and Quaker concepts of consensus.

My original understanding of consent comes from a context of sexual assault. I first came across the term when I was peripherally involved with a group of students who were working to reform the St. Mary's sexual assault policy several years ago. These students were looking at the definition of consent used in the foundational Antioch Sexual Offense Prevention Policy (SOPP). In a radical policy shift in the 1991/92 school year, Antioch changed its policy to define consent as "the act of willingly and verbally agreeing to engage in specific sexual contact or conduct."[7] This definition was radical because it impacted every sexual relationship or contact with members of the Antioch community and participants in Antioch-sponsored events. In requiring verbalizations of consent in order for sexual activity to take place, the policy insists that all members of the Antioch student body and larger community heighten their awareness of sexual assault and alternative (safer, more respectful) sex practices.

Aside from the definition of consent, the second overwhelming radical idea of the policy is the establishment of the Antioch campus and its satellite learning areas[8] as a safe space where sexual assault is not tolerated and where guidelines and standards for community members are perhaps higher than in the wider society. As is stated in Addendum A, Herstory: 1990-1996: "sexual offenses are seen as not just a violation of an individual, but as a violation of the Antioch Community. Non-consensual sexual activity is against Community Standards."[9] The policy notes that these standards are "different from those of the legal system," and in setting itself apart from this system it establishes the Antioch community as a leader (assuming the policy is effective) in developing communities that can resist and respond to sexual assault in a more empowering way.

Since first encountering the Antioch SOPP, I and many of the students who were working to reform policy at St. Mary's have continued to use consent as not only a policy- or rules-based term, but also as a way of thinking about our relationships—sexual and otherwise—with one another and with those in our extended communities. Many of us have been interested in removing consent from it's associations with policy and developing it as an erotic goal for sexual play. In this culture of date rape, asking and being asked about one's body, one's sexual likes and dislikes, one's boundaries and limits has the potential to be an incredibly subversive act. Pleasure results from a mutual understanding of the idiosyncrasies of this decision-making method,

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[7] "The Antioch College Sexual Offense Prevention Policy," 1. The 16 page Antioch policy includes a full-page definition of consent and list of ways the requirements for consent impact sexual contact between Antioch community members, as well as stipulations for how a violation of the policy should be dealt with, how complaints can be filed, how education on the policy and sexual assault prevention should occur on campus, and a "Herstory" of the development of the policy.

[8] Antioch operates a co-op program where students spend about two fifths of their credit-earning time in an off-campus job or internship. The policy states that "the SOPP is violated whenever there is an incident of non-consensual conduct on the Antioch College campus, during an Antioch sanctioned event, or between two Antioch College students regardless of location," (2).

[9] "The Antioch College Sexual Offense Prevention Policy," 5.

turning something that could initially seem awkward and difficult into a dialogue that is fun, affirming, and empowering.

Beyond sexual assault policy, Buddhist and Quaker ideals have shaped my vision for consent. In Buddhism there is a deeply held belief about interconnectedness, a belief that all things are intimately related in a sort of closed system that is affected by all its parts. If anything is added to or removed from this system it will cease to function in the way it did before. Similarly, I see a community as a system of relationships that are always shifting and changing. Bringing the idea of consent and especially the practice of consent into the consciousness of a community will intrinsically affect the way that it functions as a cohesive whole. As for Quakerism and consensus, I value the role placed in that philosophy on a *process* of decision-making where each party brings his or her deeply held moral views to the table and then comes to an agreement that fulfills everyone's specific needs. As a process, consent is not something learned overnight: it is a slow, sometimes uncomfortable and challenging movement towards something better.

THE PERFORMATIVE

All of the artists who have influenced me in making this body of work have engaged with theories of performativity. Myriad theorists in art history, performance studies[10], sociology,[11] and visual or cultural studies[12] use the term performativity to describe the relationship between theatrical or artistic performance and everyday life. As Jane Blocker defines it the performative is based in power relationships; it values liminality over legibility, change over fixity, and actions over commodifiable objects. Thus, through the performative, performance becomes embedded in a social practice.[13] Through an emphasis on ambiguity, and multiple meanings over a clear message the performative responds to the essentialism of modernity with an assertion that there can be many co-existing truths. By locating meaning in performance and the interaction of bodies in real space rather than in stable objects the performative has the potential to become a transformative method of affecting change.

Blocker notes that "while performance is . . . acting or mimetically recreating the real, the performative effects very real change, it constitutes reality . . . the performative produces or transforms a situation, *it effects* [emphasis mine]."[14] The performative is so powerful *because* it is rooted in social space and social practice and because it recognizes the power relationships that underlie its structures and contexts. Therefore through performative practice the delineation of reality and performance or reality and art vanishes, and art crosses over into the realm of the

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[10] For me the most influential performance theorist working with performative theories is Diana Taylor of the Hemispheric Institute for Performance and Politics. Jane Blocker also cites Judith Butler's gender theory as foundational in her own definition of performativity (*Where is Ana Mendieta?* 24).

[11] Significantly, psychologist and sociologist Irving Goffman's theories strongly influenced Ana Mendieta's thinking about art during her time at the University of Iowa. Goffman's performance theory holds that all human interaction is performative because it is subject to the restrictions and regulations of social mores. Thus, Goffman claimed, all human interaction occurs as though scripted, and identity is a "construction" arising from the confluence of social code and the "circulation of representations in society," (Kate Linker, *Vito Acconci*, 47).

[12] Jane Blocker also recognizes Homi Bhabha's use of performativity in examining the "ideology of the nation," and Jacques Derrida's 1977 article in *Glyph* magazine, "Signature, Event, Context," (*Where is Ana Mendieta?* 26).

[13] *Where is Ana Mendieta? Identity, Performativity, and Exile*, 24. Blocker gives a thorough summary of the performative in this monograph of Ana Mendieta.

[14] ibid., 26.

real, thereby truly *effecting change* just as a social actor does through a political protest. Art becomes a social actor.

Artists Ana Mendieta, Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gomez-Peña, and Laura Aguilar use performative practices to comment upon social phenomena and respond as social actors themselves. In their works they explore the question of what an artist consents to in the exhibition of her body as art. Each of these artists uses the living social body as a central element of their process or final presentation, and through this emphasis explores the visibility/invisibility of a particular body in order to respond to the social context in which that body is usually seen (or not seen).

Ana Mendieta is a Cuban artist who grew up in Iowa. She executed much of her work—earthworks and performances—outside gallery space in natural environments in Iowa, Mexico, and Cuba. Her most well known work is her Silueta series of 1974-1980, where she placed her body or an archetypal female (goddess) silhouette in the landscape using natural materials including mud, clay, sand, grass, flowers, blood, natural pigment, and homemade gunpowder. What I value about Mendieta's work, like that of many other feminist artists of the 1970s, is that she uses the body as a site for meaning production and reception. Mendieta's unconventional representation of the female form is subversive in its connectedness to the earth, its lack of hyper-sexuality to evoke the earth-goddess. This use of the body is performative in that it emphasizes a multiplicity of social meanings for the body and refrains from commodification or reduction of the body to a manageable object.

Mendieta's work is both present and immaterial. The body is there but not there: it is constantly in a state of un-doing. In one of Mendieta's images, an *Untitled Silueta* made in Iowa in 1977, we see a photograph of an object Mendieta made: a human form made of ice. The ice-body is photographed from above, the snow it sits on tilted upwards from the perspective. And there's actually another body present in this photograph: Mendieta's body. We see her footprints, we see the evidence of her imprint on the natural world through the creation of this ice-figure, and she is impermanent, disappearing, un-doing herself. As a representation of the body—a figure based initially on her own body, we can only imagine—her ice-object is also completely temporal and impermanent. It is susceptible to the elements, and certainly, as an object, it is not intended for consumption in a gallery. By creating this *silueta* Mendieta makes an art object, but the only evidence of that object that ends up in a gallery is a photographic image. This image emphasizes both the disappearance of the object from the real space of the gallery and its permanence in a photographic record. In fact, the record is less a record of the object itself than it is of the object's disappearance, and the disappearance of Mendieta's own body in making that object. This dynamic denies the power of the art object itself as a site of meaning, instead placing meaning in the act of making, the performative moment.

DISPLAY AND COMPLICITY

In their 1992 performance *Two Undiscovered Amer-Indians Visit the West*, Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gomez-Peña use the power of the performative moment to reflect upon the persistence of colonial narratives in the museum context. In this performance Fusco and Gomez-Peña dressed as two indigenous people who had just been discovered on an island in the

Caribbean. The artists were displayed in a cage in front of natural history, anthropology, and art museums to audiences in various countries around the world, alongside their cultural artifacts and "traditional dress" such as grass skirts, lucha libre wrestling masks, bones, sunglasses, hammocks, and televisions. Assistants dressed as museum interpreters were on hand to discuss the customs of these people and answer questions from visitors. They also offered photographs with the Indians for a dollar and for five dollars the visitor could feed them bananas through the bars of their cage. For another nominal fee Gomez-Peña would recite a traditional folk tale in his "native" (nonsense) language.[15]

In terms of the performative, this piece certainly critiques power relationships of colonialism. In an overt display of colonial tendencies, Fusco and Gomez-Peña cage themselves, taking on the role of indigenous people on display as anthropological objects for Western viewing pleasure. The artists pit the "native" against the western spectator in order to see how the westerner will react and respond to such a blatant historical incongruity. In seeking audience response, the piece values a liminality or multiplicity of meanings rather than aiming for a one overwhelming, specific reaction. In response to the presence of these "other bodies" in the epistemological space of the museum, the audience both desires the bodies as objects of fascination[16] and is horrified by a newfound sense of the visibility of power structures of colonialism inherent in the display of live bodies. The confluence of reality and performance/art creates unclear boundaries between the real and the constructed, making it hard to tell whether the museum, a bastion of knowledge, is serious or pulling a practical joke.[17] It is also difficult to tell to what extent the artists *are consenting* to being fed a banana through the bars of their cage, and to what extent they feel degraded by such an inhuman interaction. Through this transformation of space and situation, Fusco and Gomez-Pena make the audience complicit in the *very real* underlying structures of power that the performance is meant to make visible.

In my work in the fall, I had a similar intent to make my audience complicit in a power structure and a set of relationships that they might not otherwise be aware of by making these underlying principles more visible. Specifically, I was dealing with the gaze on the female body, a topic explored in extreme depth by women artists from VALIE EXPORT to Vanessa Beecroft. This work also brought up questions of the contrast between the public and the private by questioning where the line is that divides public space from private space. I did this in my videos where I brought the private space of my studio—made even more private by my nearly-nude presentation of my body there—into the public realm of art. I also collapsed the public and the private by

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[15] For a great exploration of the full scope of this project see Fusco and Gomez-Peña's video *The Couple In The Cage*.

[16] For a reading of desire and othered bodies in Coco Fusco's work see Caroline Vercoe's "Agency and Ambivalence: A Reading of Works by Coco Fusco" in *The Bodies That Were Not Ours And Other Writings*.

[17] The degree to which the artists consent to this multiplicity of audience responses is closely tied up with the mechanisms of display that they invoke in their performance. Fusco and Gomez-Peña sit within a cage/stage that presents them as objects on display to their audience. Using site-specific museum spaces heightens this dynamic, establishing their set and props as artifacts that help define western knowledge about these other bodies. What is happening in the cage/on the stage is not always coherent with a Western ideal for the native, but the viewer fills in the gaps and makes this a real space where bodies could fit and make sense. Vercoe calls this amalgam "a discourse of colonial nostalgia and primitivist fantasies," (*The Bodies That Were Not Ours,* 233).

choosing to use the Women's Restroom as my installation space and thereby questioning to what extent the bathroom is a private space for one gender.

Another set of critical issues in this Fall Semester work are consent and safe space. I use the term safe space with knowledge of the ways it is used in a feminist context to delineate the space where we can be free from oppressive forces. I also connect safe space back to the Antioch College SOPP's ideal of creating not only a new definition of consent and the way we relate to one another but also establishing a safe campus where people's responsibilities are distinct from those of the greater society.

I thought about safe spaces and safe people in the filming of my video when I was considering who would have control over the images and where they would be produced. I chose to allow my boyfriend, someone who I am intimately comfortable with, to film me. Later, I considered the different spaces available to me for the presentation of the video and tried to determine which spaces would most embody the complex array of feelings that I had about my body being on display. I wanted the process of viewing to be a consensual experience for me as a maker and displayer of my body. Because the images were displayed so intimately I needed to control the way that they were approached in order for it to feel safe for me. I felt the images should be viewed outside the public space of the gallery in a more private and intimate context. I chose the bathroom because to me it was a space that had an implied intimacy but which simultaneously suggested a fear of being caught and social discomfort or awkwardness. These were the feelings I was dealing with in making the video, and I wanted them to be brought up again as viewers watched it in a charged space. Much in the way that Fusco and Gomez-Peña's props and cage-set informed the reading of their "native" bodies on display, I used the peep show box and the women's bathroom site as a context for negotiating the images of my own body.

In a more recent piece, *Complicit*, which was included as part of the spring semester *consenting bodies* installation, I was interested in the work being a space for interchange between figures and an audience or viewer. Much in the way that Fusco and Gomez-Pena's interactions with audience members created a discourse on colonialism, power, and agency, in my work the viewer is invited to become a participant in the art by turning a crank to activate the figures in the box. I think of these carved plaster forms as miniaturized figures, body fragments, or balls of crunched up energy. These bodies are static without an audience, but they come to life when turned. The crank is the indicator of interactivity and the spur for the audience to reach into the space of the art object and become a participant. In contrast to my Fall work, these bodies are not representationally connected to my own body, so they become third person bodies, another personality in the space. Looking at them and turning them around implicates the viewer in a relationship with the figures that questions whether they are objects or subjects, and opens up a dialogue about bodies on display. To what extent do these bodies consent to be activated? How do they show their consent?

ACTIVATING THE SUBJECT

Laura Aguilar, a chicana lesbian photographer from L.A., is another of my sources who deals with the female body on display and objecthood vs. subjecthood. Aguilar's recent work, the *Stillness* and *Motion* series (both 1999), and the *Center* series (2000), is made up of series of

nude self portraits in the landscape. Her work is often compared to one reading of Ana Mendieta's in that both women use their Latina bodies in the landscape as a method of reconnecting to the earth, their roots as women of color, and a feminine form of spirituality.[18] For Mendieta's work this interpretation seems blind to the issues she was dealing with in relation to objecthood, and performance, but I think its application to Aguilar's work is apt in the sense that her reconnection to landscape via her art is a way of exploring and determining her identity.

As Amelia Jones describes it, Aguilar's "non-normative subjectivity" is the most prominent element of her self-portraits.[19] Many women have used the idea of earth as mother goddess, but Aguilar's large body is not the typical view of femininity that we usually see in relation to the land. We are used to an idealized female form, nymph-like and lovely, passively meditating on the contrast between the natural (feminine) world and the man-made (masculine, phallocentric) one. These representations of the earth as feminine show it as something to be conquered and mastered, tamed, even. Aguilar's images completely reject this reading of the natural world in favor of a psychological process of negotiation and determination of the self. Perhaps it is her body's failure to fit into the ideal of womanhood that denies the traditional reading of woman and earth.

In these photographs Aguilar's private and personal process of identity formation is made public. She is meditative and calm, inwardly directed in her poses. In *Stillness #17* her body collapses into the root system of a tree, as though she is trying to become one with it. In *Center* #173 she bends back and to the side, pushing away from the camera. She denies us the gaze we expect from a female nude, instead turning inward toward her own body and the earth. The flesh folds and hair are like natural elements of the landscape around her—but not quite. It is clear that she is other, separate, clear that she cannot quite conform or fit in.

In these photographs, unlike my own piece *Complicit*, Aguilar as the figure is *self-activated*, her energy and life emerging from within rather than being brought to life by the viewer. Although we differ in the ways that the bodies we depict are activated, I share with Aguilar an interest in the balance between a body being an object and a body becoming the subject of the gaze. Despite Aguilar's inability to fit in and cohere to her surroundings, she is still active as subject in these photographs rather than an object of the gaze. The physical movement of her body through the landscape in these works mirrors the mental movement and adjustments required to fit into her social body. The identity markers of otherness that we reap upon her—woman, lesbian, chicana, overweight—and her ability to negotiate these identities stripped down to her nude core suggest that she is exploring the extent of this social body. I define consent as a political consciousness made manifest through action of the body, and here Aguilar models this idea through the active display of her (politically charged) nude form. It is the fact that this incoherent, lacking, and failed body (by our social standards) is put on display via such an intimate medium as photography that makes these works so psychologically charged.

[18] "Ana Mendieta's Sphere of Influence," 41.
[19] *Body Art: Performing the Subject*, 224.

BODYOBJECTS THAT CONSENT

In my spring semester SMP work, I created an installation/performance piece which I titled *consenting bodies*. Made up of a collection of objects presented on a table with a few objects on the walls, everything was meant to be experienced through touch and interaction. Having minimal inherent meaning or significance on their own, I saw the objects as gaining importance in the context of other bodies, living and moving through and beyond their space.

As objects made of plaster, wood, found objects, fabric, and thread, I experience this work not as inherently powerful, good, or important in their own right. Thinking back to the Vicuña quote, "an object is not an object, it is the witness to a relationship," I emphasize the social meaning of these objects. I do not see these as sculptures on their own. They are absurd fragments of the body, strange and disconnected. They are oddities, body parts that range from representational duplicates of parts of my body disconnected from their original locations to fully abstract forms that emerge intuitively from poured or carved plaster. I believe they need to exist in dialogue with other body fragments, and especially in dialogue with live human bodies in order for them to take on meaning.

To show the importance of interaction and live bodies in making meaning of these objects I videotaped a performance that enacts one way that the objects could be with humans. I made up narratives about the objects to do this performance, but I would encourage the participants in my installation to disregard them and use their own narratives if they don't like these. For the performance, I began to think of these objects as fragments of my body that have fallen off and are trying to find a way to fit themselves back on. I also see them as fetish objects, something that I desire to have as a part of me that can never quite fit or be whole. Inherent in these narratives is a sense of wholeness broken, the incomplete, or that which does not fit. While I was making this video I realized that it is through touch that these static plaster objects become bodily, flesh, and flesh as a text that is meant to be read.

My sewn objects are mostly clothing or dresses for the plaster bodyobjects or functional objects that make up the world of my installation space. Sewn forms like the cover for the television in my installation behave like dresses that contain an interior body (the TV, DVD player, and its cords). This body is not invisible when given clothes. In some ways it is actually more visible as an object because in covering it I alter the expected perception of the TV as a TV and nothing more, providing it with a social context in which to exist in the installation space. I also use sewn spaces as molds, negative-space interiors that are filled up with wet plaster that dries to make solid positive forms. These sewn cavities are like the insides of the body, an inside that is entered and filled.

I also use sewing to make books which often have pages of double-thick fabric that serves as a pocket for a plaster object. I make books because they have a universal form that participants in my installations know how to read,[20] and because they have an inside and an outside that is rich in metaphor. The covers of a book can be read, for instance, as the exterior of the body (skin), while the inner pages represent the interior of the body. This could be either a literal interior—

[20] The books I am thinking of are a specifically western-style form (as opposed to scroll books or other eastern/Japanese-style artist books), one which almost all of the people who encounter my installations are intimately aware of because of their roles in a western educational institution.

organs like the heart, lungs, blood—or a more metaphorical interior representing inner thoughts and feelings. This interpretation also yields to association with the contrast between the public and the private suggested by the public self vs. the private, interior self.

The body or bodies presented in this installation space are, in a sense, self portraits, just as Mendieta's or Aguilar's, or even Fusco's works are self portraits. Many women artists, especially those who identify themselves as feminists, are given the label narcissist when they disclose the self portrait aspects of their artistic explorations.[21] This reactionary response puts the social applications of the work in danger of being ignored. I see the bodies that I work with as self-portraits but also as much more than representations of the self. In fact, it is because they are outside the self and beyond my body that I feel comfortable permitting them to be handled and touched. I think it is important to see these objects as bodies because as bodies they can be approached as the beginning of a dialogue about consent. As objects they are stable, but as bodies they expand out into the world, requesting through their subjecthood a thoughtful response from the participants in the installation.

BODIES AND BOXES: THROUGH AND BEYOND THE GALLERY

In 2005, I predated many of the issues that I am still dealing with in *consenting bodies* in *The Barter Project*. For this project I made plaster casts of different parts of my body and bartered them with people for objects of their choosing during a performance outside the central building on campus. Then I made a sort of traveling salesman's case to display the body parts for barter. This was perhaps the beginning of a tendency of mine to put the body into a box, and in doing so pack up the body and simplify it. I like boxes for some of the same reasons I like books. They have a clear interior and exterior that tends towards metaphors of public vs. private, interior vs. exterior. In this project my desire to pack up the body into a case exemplified the tendency to make the body more convenient for marketable exchange.

When I pack up the body, everything has its place. In *Display Case for the Barter Project* I even carved out a space for each specific object ensuring that no other body part could fit there. Upon closer examination, though, it becomes clear that the apparent coherence and convenience of the box is false. The body packed up like this is incoherent. There are two noses and two belly buttons, and parts are missing. The fragments do not add up to a complete whole, a complete body.

In *consenting bodies,* I am still packing up the body into a box. My installation space can be seen as a box. There is an interior and an exterior. On the outside wall (the exterior) I present three *bodyobject studies* and a piece called *safe space,* a box which opens onto a rich and whimsical interior landscape whose materials reference the materials used inside the installation space. This exterior wall gives the viewer a sense of what she will find inside, but blocks her view of it except for a small opening, the doorway to the space. The interior has its own walls, and I used the presentational space of the table to display the body in fragments. Moving through and around this box the viewer is able to interact with the space by turning the cranks on the wall-based box objects, looking through the fabric dress-neck to watch the video on the tv, opening

[21] See the Introduction to *Interfaces: Women/Autobiography/Image/Performance*, particularly pages 12-14.

and closing wood and plaster book-forms, reading fabric and plaster books with their hands, and holding and turning over in their hands the body fragments.

This space is quiet and safe. As a body it is consenting to being touched in a specific way, but the consent is unspoken and unclear. People in the space question whether they should touch, whether they should move or interact with the body, and I value their concern for the sanctity of this body. In an art space like a gallery we are not often given permission to touch, to move, to interact with the art. This art—this body—can only become something when you *do* touch it, and through touching activate it, and through activating it engage with the performance and become the performative, engage with the consenting bodies that move through and beyond this space.

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