

PERFORM

AT
WITHIN
BEYOND

BOUNDARY

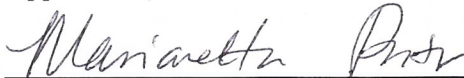
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Most serious thought in our time struggles with the feeling of homelessness. The felt unreliability of human experience brought about by the inhuman acceleration of historical change has led every sensitive modern mind to the recording of some kind of nausea, of intellectual vertigo. And the only way to cure this spiritual nausea seems to be, at least initially, to exacerbate it. Modern thought is pledged to a kind of applied Hegelianism: seeking its Self in its Other.... Anthropology conquers the estranging function of the intellect by institutionalizing it. For the anthropologist, the world is professionally divided into 'home' and 'out there,' the domestic and the exotic, the urban academic world and the tropics. The anthropologist is not simply a neutral observer. He is a man in control of, and even consciously exploiting, his own intellectual alienation.

- Susan Sontag, "*The Anthropologist as Hero*" in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, (1966)



ABSTRACT

Per^FORM | at/within/beyond | BOUNDARY benchmarks a body of work which strives to reconcile intellectual and haptic knowledge, verbal and gestural communication, concrete and ephemeral notions of belonging. My experience living on Réunion Island, an Outer Seas Department of France in the Indian Ocean spurred my inquiry into the malleability of language and the transformation of identity. The importance of social acceptance manifested itself to me more vividly than I had ever before experienced, in large part due to the extremes of the circumstances: I felt distanced from the language, the mannerisms, the climate, the cuisine, etc. and in order to close that gap I felt myself stretched beyond comfort. The materials, processes, and performances of this installation have become analogies for the journey of the ethnographer. Good observation and faithful documentation are two of the ethnographer's tools; the rest of the encounter can only be written through a willingness to experience vulnerability, resilience, and innovation. My personal journey towards acceptance illuminated the power struggles, injustices, and the creative resilience of the creole community I strove to become a part of.

Prologue

Situated about 500 miles east of Madagascar, 21 degrees south of the equator, lies a vestige of France's colonial past. Settled in the 17th century, several forces contributed to the formation of Réunion's creole culture and language: the convergence of peoples from three continents (Africa, Asia, and Europe) in the context of a slave-based plantation economy set against the backdrop of an extreme topography. *Marrons* and *Ti'blancs* settled in the inhospitable crevices of the island's interior: *Gros Blancs* exploited *cafre* and *malbar* labor, first as slaves then rented out plots to *kolons*.¹ Hierarchical relationships and socio-cultural markers exist in the contemporary Réunionnese creole language as evidence of the historical rifts within this deeply stratified culture.² The language is a mixture of adaptation, assimilation, resistance and transformation. It is a language that I continue to navigate with curiosity and unease.

* * *

My initial motives for venturing 10,000 miles from home were admittedly muddled: I vaguely justified soul searching under the guise of seeking professional skills -teaching ESL, cross-cultural communication, acquiring my own second language (French). Landing on the tarmac in Réunion Island in 2006 was a far cry from the dramatized depictions of tropical island communities in the psyche of the global north. The landing was smooth, the mannerisms and mechanisms of airport staff were glazed with a European veneer, and traffic was not impeded by as many goats as I had fantasized.

My arrival scene on Réunion Island was not what I expected. Anticipation of being immediately "outed" as a foreigner unraveled as I noticed there were plenty of white, blond, "big" people milling around baggage claim. Similarly, I was disappointed with the fulfillment of anticipated sensory details: the wall of stifling humidity, the blinding tropical sun, the wave of unintelligible phonemes and pitch swirling around my straining ears.

Yes, upon first encounter, this place was digestible, attainable. I had leapt off North America in the direction of remoteness, exoticism, and adventure- a plunge that only eventually engaged survival skills. Instead of instantaneous immersion I found it took years of steeping before the dye would take. I arrived with eyes wide open, ready to gather and catalog these many

¹ There are identity markers that are used in Réunionnese creole to talk about contemporary or historical socio/ ethnic/ racial categories: *Marrons*= escaped slaves who are most likely mixed, African-French or Malagasy-French. The name refers to both the rogue nature of their status (marooned) as well as the medium complexion (brown), *Ti'blancs* or *Yabs*= poor creoles of mostly Caucasian ancestry, *Gros Blancs*= wealthy land owners often of more European decent, *Cafre / Cafrine*= denotes someone of mostly African decent. Despite its Arabic etymology as "infidel," today "*Cafre*" is not as derogatory a term as in the past nor as in other communities with similar terminology. *Malbar/ Malbarese*= South Indian then rented out plots to *Kolons* (créole tenant farmers). *Zoreils* are mainland French who have more recently moved to the island whose complexion and inability to understand Réunionese Creole earn them this term derived in part from "les oreilles" (Standard French for "ear").

² Although much of this I learned through informal interactions during my time there, I also have found this reiterated by a variety of scholars on Réunionese society, including Françoise Vergès, (herself Réunionese by birth), Vergès, 1999: xiii-xiv.

moments of initial encounter. The mental shift happened gradually- *au fur et à mesure*- almost imperceptibly eroding away my comfortable ignorance of how strange I really was.



Video Still from *Under the Loom*, video projected on one wall in the installation of Per^FORM | at/within/beyond | BOUNDARY, March 9-24, 2012.

* * *

Encounters

I arrived at the Bed and Breakfast sometime in the steamy morning after a grueling 36-hour trip. My exhausted body was ready to surrender to the cold tile floor, but Suzie pulled back the sheets, closed the hurricane-proof shutters, and left me to sleep in the humid darkness. Until that moment my mind had been swollen with panicked excitement. I had been overwhelmed with the rental agreements and work contracts of which I couldn't make out the details. Just before my body hit, I remember remarking on the absurdity of a square bed with square pillows...

Susie and Didi were unhappy. Tedious meal preparation, constant cleaning, blood-sugar monitoring, a gambling son, an illegitimate grandson. And yet they always smeared away the chagrin from their sweat-stained brows, shrugged off their personal burden, to reveal their dutiful, welcoming gaze.

My room was next to theirs. The mumble of their nightly squabbling was audible only because a large placard³ was inserted into the space where a large doorway had been. Except for the partition between our two rooms, all the other walls in the house were concrete, forbidding words or bodies from crossing. While this portal denied physical entry into my room, it did not filter the jab and moan of their banter, rendering me submissive to their melancholy.

They grew weary of pandering to whining guests, mopping the square white tiles, never making ends meet. They prayed to the Holy Virgin Mary at a Tamil shrine out back. I soon joined their daily chores hoping to alleviate them; hoping to accumulate vocabulary; hoping to dissipate some of the pain (I inevitably absorbed) seeping through the cracks in the wall.

Suzie all too gladly handed me the mop and bucket. She hoisted the linen pile up high, so I was ironing square pillowcases beyond the early dusk of the tropics. She oiled my hands in order to pull apart sticky jack-fruit fibers and laughed at my squeamishness in plucking the rooster for supper.

The line between benefactor and benefited began to dissolve. I had to remind myself of the facts: I was paying them in exchange for room and board. Three quarters of my paycheck ensured a place to sleep and food to eat. But I was isolated: their house was far from town. Didi refused to allow me to come and go after dark. They began to insist on my once voluntary involvement in their business. "My Little Blondy" or "Whitey" Didi would sweetly call me. Despite the mounting pressure to please I knew that Didi and Suzie did care for me, I was the one outsider who was not passing through as quickly.

Who was generous here?

Who was vulnerable?

"Am I growing or am I caught in a doomed stasis?"

My movement through their lives, like the sinewy strands of molasses in water, was slow, heavy, and fragrant.

³ A "placard" like an armoire or a wardrobe, is a piece of furniture used for storing clothes. I used to the North American convention of arranging ones clothes in a subset of the architecture of a bedroom, (a closet). The placard was made into a provisional wall only by its placement in this doorwar and the plywood that covered the remaining gap.

Arrival Scene: An Ethnographic Trope

September 18, 2006: Pupils restrict, pores dilate, jaws clench; a stifling humidity demands I shift my attention to my body. I had arrived on the shores of a volcanic spec burped up by the Indian Ocean belonging to France's colonial legacy hoping to transcend cultural barriers. I wanted to soak up as much as I could around me: vocabulary, odors, street smarts, and for a time was willing to loosen my grasp on my own worldview. Upon my first encounter with Réunion Island, excitement was soon engulfed in apprehension, fear, and bewilderment.

“In the ethnographic memoir, an author takes us back to the corner of his or her life in the field that was unusually vivid, full of affect, or framed by unique events. By narrowing the lens, these authors provide a window into their personal lives in the field, a focus which would not be possible in a full-length autobiography. The author of a narrative ethnography also deals with experiences, but along with these come ethnographic data, epistemological reflections on fieldwork participation, and cultural analysis. The world, in a narrative ethnography, is re-presented as perceived by a situated narrator, who is also present as a character in the story that reveals his own personality. This enables the reader to identify the consciousness which has selected and shaped the experiences within the text. In contrast to memoirs, narrative ethnographies focus not on the ethnographer herself, but rather on the character and process of ethnographic dialogue or encounter.”

- Barbara Tedlock 1991, 77-78

The first three years I lived in Réunion I did not consider the ethnographic nature of my experience. I was meticulously noting social interactions, linguistic oddities, and impressions without calling them “field notes.” I had no knowledge of the four mythical archetypes of historical anthropology (the amateur observer of the 18th&19th centuries, the armchair anthropologists (late 19th century) who relied on the accounts of the aforementioned, the professional ethnographer, and the ‘gone native’ fieldworker⁴). The reality is that I was interested in what anthropology asks of its surroundings but it is only after leaving the field that I’ve begun to frame my experiences that way. While huddled in a corner room of Susi and Didi’s Bed & Breakfast, I was filled with genuine curiosity: asking, observing, reflecting. Sketching Susi’s favorite television personalities as she drifted in and out of watching them intently and deriving implications on her pride for her daughter or ambivalence towards her son. Grinding green chilies, purple onions, and salt in a mortar and pestle carved from volcanic rock is seared in my sensory memory bank. Unlike the trained professional, however, I didn’t have an end product envisioned; first and foremost I was navigating my own journey of social survival.

At first I lived in a passive, permeable state-- succumbing to the rhythm of cleaning, cooking, and family gossip as dictated by my hosts-- until I realized I had relinquished 80% of my

⁴ Tedlock 1991, 69.

comfort zone. I began to find ways to regain self-confidence by reconstructing the familiar. Late November, when the air thickens with jasmine at night and swelters with rotting fruit during the day, I ambled through the farmer's market in search of some fruit or vegetable shipped in from a temperate climate. I lugged two heavy squash back to Susi and declared that I was going to make her pumpkin pie. After my 5th pie, Susi's furled brow finally gave way to complaint: "*Rachelle! the gas you are using to cook all of these is costing us a fortune!*" I hadn't realized until then why most cooking in Reunion happens outside on a grill lit by burning acacia or litchi branches. Small, gas ovens, that only well-to-do Réunionese have and rarely use, are expensive and seen as a luxury. Finding remnants of home to ease the journey into the alien is not immune to wrinkles.



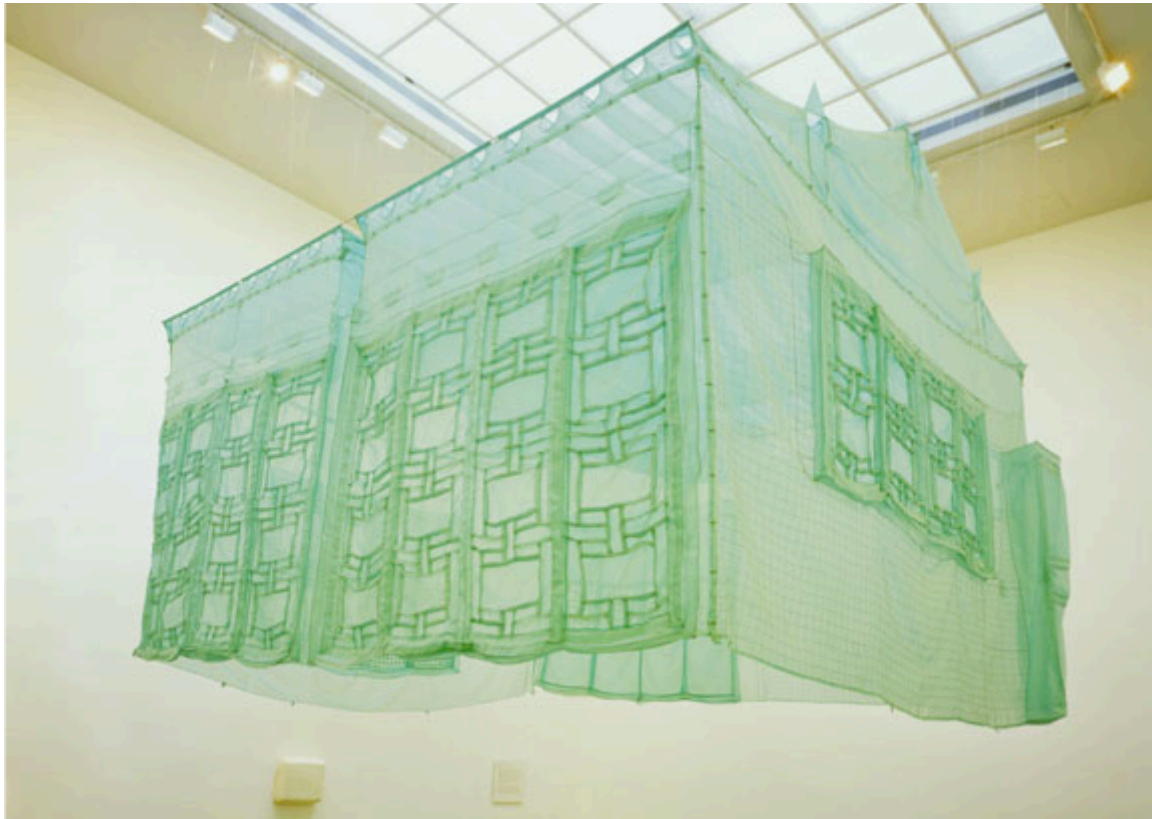
Tamil temple in St-Gilles-les-Hauts the near the Maison de Villèle, a museum made out of the former home of the notorious Madame Desbassyns, a coffee and sugar baroness who owned 300 slaves.⁵

The next several months turned into three years of living with different hosts (I moved out of Susi and Didi's room, first to a bungalow rented by a *zoreil* family, then a brief stint with a creole boyfriend, and then rented from a *yab* woman in the highlands on the southwest side of the island). As I reflected on the many revelatory moments I experienced in my time living in Réunion, I noticed a strange divergence of sentiment: on the one hand, I felt more intrigued with the unanswered aspects of this alien culture; I wanted to dig deeper, stay longer, and ask more questions. On the other hand I felt a strong push back, both from the people I had such grown so attached to as well as from within myself: Who was I to stick my nose in their

⁵ The slaves (who were mostly Cafres) were especially maltreated on her plantation. Mme. Desbassyn, like many plantation owners at the time of emancipation, replaced the work force with Malbar indentured servants. The freed slaves fled the area and established settlements in the interior of the island or congregated in the urban areas. The neighborhood remains mostly Malbar because of their historically less antagonistic relationship with the Desbassyn estate.

business much less set down roots? And yet there was something powerful that compelled me to stay. Even after my deliberate choice to leave and continue my education in the States, I felt the incessant tug that there was unfinished business. This was, in part, a matter of loosing grip on exactly where I was situated in the story.

* * *



Do ho Suh *Seoul Home/ L.A. Home/ New York Home/Baltimore Home/ London Home/ Seattle Home/ L.A.Home.* 1999, Silk. 149 x 240 x 240 inches

There are many irrefutable ways in which Do Ho Suh’s work discourses with my own and feels relevant to mention here: fabric, threads, engagement of architecture, light, and weight. It is in the nexus of so many intersecting interests that I find myself most passionately engaged with his work. In his fabric replicated architecture, such as in the “Home” series his departure from “tangible solid to ghostly shell is captivating and mimes the way we remember our lives in space.”⁶ The sculpture is an exact replica of his parent’s home in Seoul, South Korea. Its installation in each new city adds to its name and therefore its sense of belonging to a place. Whether desired or suppressed, what we bring with us everywhere is a certain amount of “home.” Replicating every light switch, windowsill, and touchable surface appeals not only to my sense of meticulousness, but that of desiring a tactile intimacy. The impulse to preserve (or fabricate) a sense of home is explored through the spatial contours of memory and culturally defined perceptions.

⁶ Martin, 2009.

The anthropologist's motives are occasionally challenged: Virginia Dominguez discusses the advantages and disadvantages of "insiders" scholarship: of ethnographers who study the communities they take to be their own. She writes that the "...level of familiarity, depth of affection, and feelings of commitment," in other words "love" for a community does not correlate exclusively to members only. She writes that it is a "mistake [to assume] that only longtime 'insiders' are ever driven by love—or even that they are always driven by love." She illuminates the "editorial dilemmas" of "all scholars who write about people they really care about... not just those born, raised and active in local, regional, or national communities of which they have been long time members."⁷ One of these dilemmas is knowing how much and in what light to craft the self in the body of the text.

The ethnographer in the field may end up becoming highly sensitized, entering into conflict or upsetting circumstances due to the degree of personal investment of the outsider. In Kurt Wolff's "Surrender and Community Study: The Study of Loma," he explains the vulnerability of coming to care for, indeed love the community he went to study. Wolff writes that it took a long time to sort through and analyze his personal narrative since at the time he had "fallen through the web of culture patterns and assorted conceptual meshes into the chaos of love; [he] was looking everywhere, famished, with a ruthless glance."⁸

Almost by definition the field of Anthropology has historically been fixated on the "other" and by extension the texts they produce are for the purpose of relaying information they gather about some community back to the professional community. The appropriate positioning of the author in relation to the text, once believed to be external, analytical and distanced, has gradually shifted to the inside of the page. The presence of the ethnographer as a character in the scene being depicted acknowledges the inevitable impact they have on a situation they have come to observe. Along with the shift in perspective was an opening of style, naturally to allow for alternative voice. Clifford Geertz discusses the fundamental question of what the author "authors" when contemplating the position and voice of the ethnographer:

The difficulty is that the oddity of constructing texts ostensibly scientific out of experiences broadly biographical, which is after all what ethnographers do, is thoroughly obscured...Focusing on the empirical, brings charges of insensitivity, of treating people as objects, of hearing the words but not the music, and, of course, of ethnocentrism. Focusing on the autobiographical brings charges of impressionism, of treating people as puppets, of hearing music that doesn't exist, and of course, of ethnocentrism.

- Clifford Geertz, 1988: 10

This cynical point of view is nonetheless indicative of the struggle within the field of Anthropology to define its purpose, treading carefully so as not to offend the very subjects it studies. I don't pretend, even now, to be an ethnographer. However, the knowledge that

⁷ Dominguez, 2000: 363-4.

⁸ Wolff, 1964: 235.

ethnographers in the past 30 years have been writing narratives that observe their own participation, rather than the “ethnographic memoir that centers on the *Self* or the standard monograph centering on the *Other*.” Both *Self* and *Other* presented together in the story exposes aspects of an “ethnographic dialogue.”⁹ Paul Stoller and Ruth Behar are among many who embrace the notion of blurred genres and creative approaches to the text itself. That I could tell my own stories of encounter, through creative construction of words or materials, opened up my ability to process my experiences.¹⁰

Evidence of Contact: Reflections on Themes in My Work

Despite the previous section’s discussion of my discovery of creative approaches to ethnographic writing, my means of working through lived experience involves first and foremost a nonverbal exploration of materials and the body’s relationship to them. Without frontloading metaphors, I gravitate towards materials and processes that usually correspond to a proprioceptive or kinesthetic knowledge. Through experimentation and reflection I gradually discover their story telling abilities. The following three works were the seeds for the body of work exhibited in Per^FORM | at/within/beyond | BOUNDARY, exploring notions of residue, resistance, and ritual.

Encounter, 2010.

Wood panel, ink, vellum, sticks. Part I of a 2 part interactive installation.

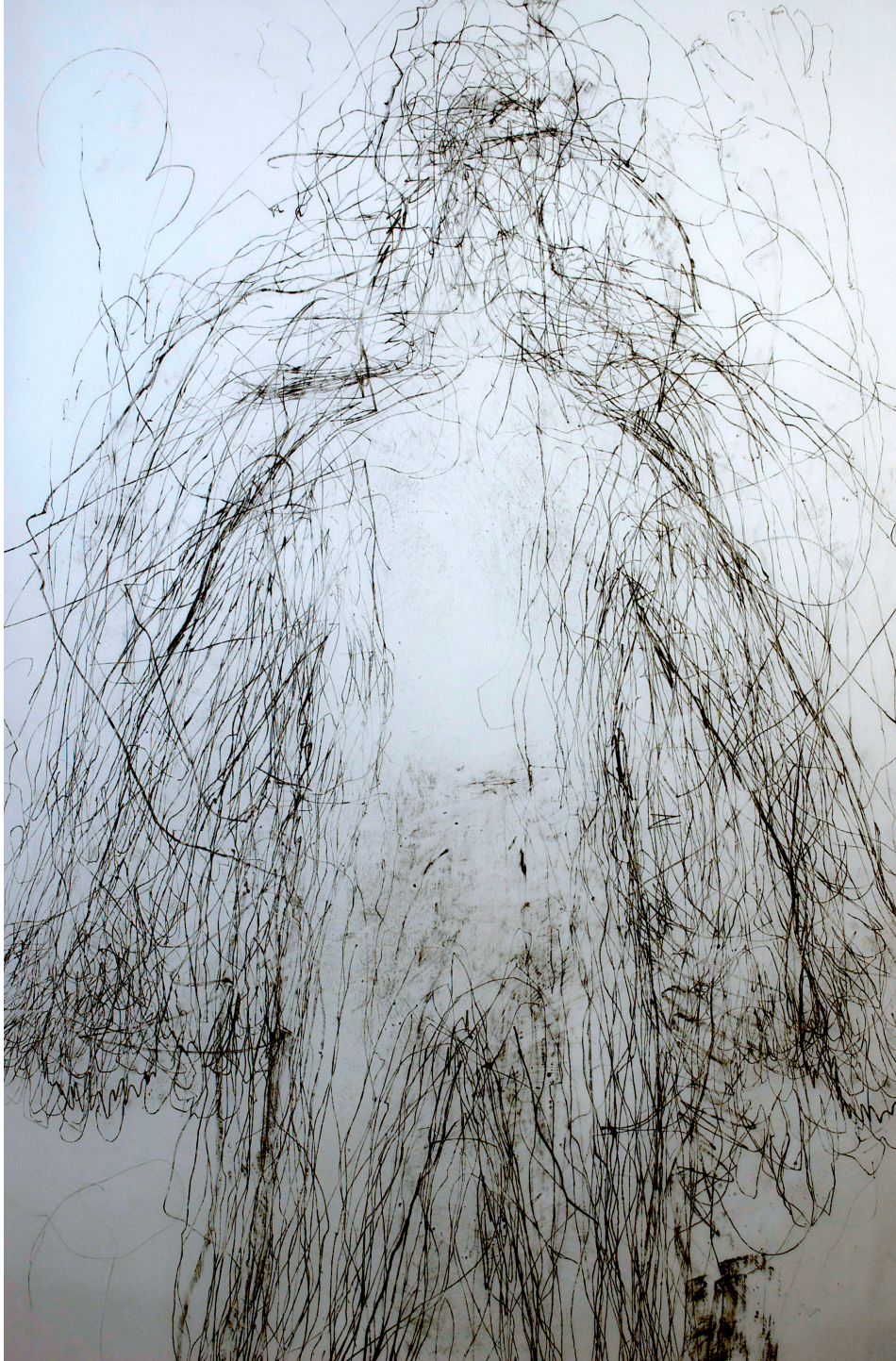


Marking, in its simplest of forms, carries with it a metaphor of power.¹¹ Someone or something does the marking (active), someone or something is marked (passive). I thought about the moment of encounter of any two alien entities as being commemorated or recorded by a mark. In “Encounter,” (2010), I asked the participants to “present” themselves through a simple yet subjective act of outlining their silhouette. What should be a straight-forward representation of the self is actually a loaded action: each person’s interpretation and execution of the rules inevitably reflects and affects her/his self-perception. The act of drawing itself is revealed to be only an impression since the ink not applied but transferred from behind (a process similar to trace monotype in that there was a large “inked” surface behind the vellum). The body of the participant is

⁹ Tedlock 1991: 69

¹⁰ Ruth Behar’s *Translated Woman: Crossing the Border with Esperanza’s Story* was among the most influential showing me the potential for creative approaches to the ethnographic document.

¹¹ Images are: *Installation detail with participant; Record of accumulated “encounters” on vellum*



immediately removed from the source and translated in the moment of contact. While the marks represent a universally recognized border of what could be any person, each is simultaneously a unique record of a specific person. These led to investigations of authorship, agency in the act of “writing,” and alternative forms of mark making ultimately present in the “Barrier” installation in my thesis exhibition which is discussed in detail later.

Adaptation (sketch & prototype), 2010-2012

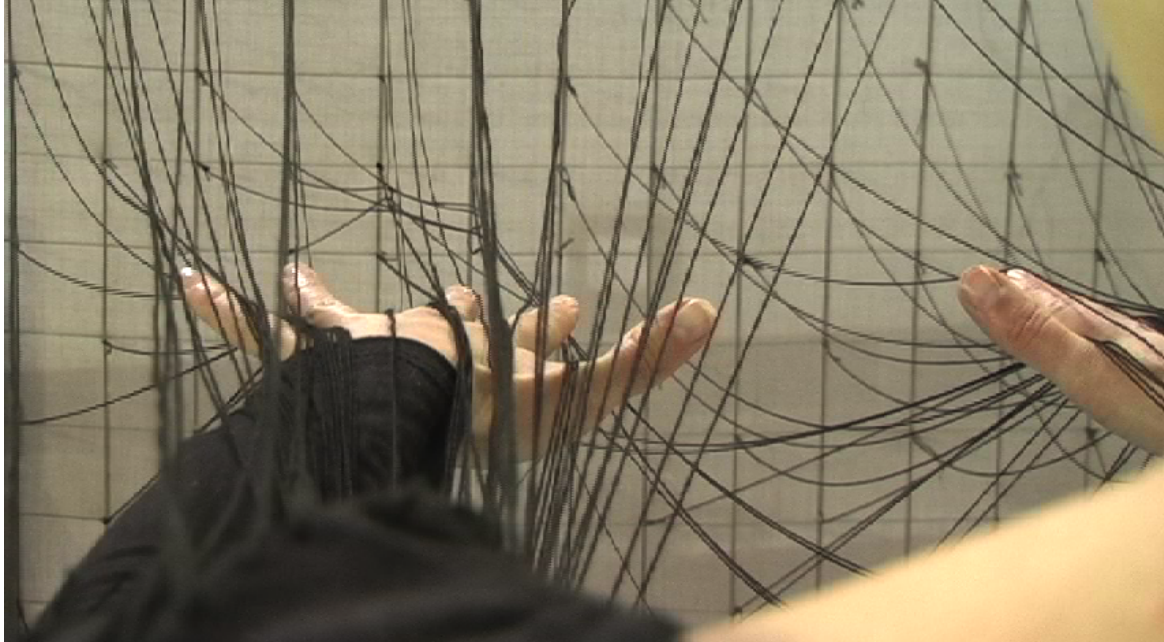
Sketches and studies in providing resistance and grounding to a live body.



Whether out of curiosity or a need to belong. The goal of an outsider is to blend his or her harsh edges, mute dissonant colors, and muffle all indication of difference. Assimilation brings with it the calm of nondetection but doesn't guarantee greater understanding or evolution of worldview. Any foreigner- whether enthusiastic expat or reluctant refugee- has a limit to how much he/she can modify, adjust, and absorb. Tension, suspension, restriction, and resistance became natural counterbalances to passive flexibility.

Here performer Susan Thiel responds to wearing a shirt whose shoulders are attached to a taut screen of fabric with threads

inserted along a Cartesian grid. When she moves on direction along a plane parallel to the screen, she inevitably pulls the threads taut in some areas of the square of fabric, puckering the surface like dimples or indentations on the surface of skin.



Vested for Apotropaic Breath, 2011.
Steel, polyester, rayon.



This sculpture in the thesis exhibition developed from the above mentioned studies in the notion of resistance and tension. Instead of the singular (and depressing) reading of being restrained I wanted to imply a space to breathe: a potential place to inhabit; and the revitalizing possibilities of being stretched- here, literally, but in my experience abroad, metaphorically. Ultimately the investigations of passive absorption to active resistance led to the notion of transformation. Passing through something, like a filter, lent itself to the idea of

permeability without the loss of agency. Traversing a threshold was a journey, so some form of transformation needed to take place.

Trans, Tranz, Travz, Travrs, Traverse, 2010- 2011

96" x 96"x 240"

steel, pine, polyester, nylon thread, charcoal



An eight by eight foot steel square stands vertically in space; its inner surface area a taut yet vulnerable screen. The matte yet translucent fabric shrouds the space beyond it in a light mist. Over the course of 1 ½ weeks a performer dips hundreds of threads in charcoal and pierces the screen in a pattern of approximated square spaces marked by the threads' placement. The

threading is gradually and methodically performed until the entire surface area of the screen is filled. The plane itself creating a sudden division between taut organization and chaotic entropy.



Detail shot of performance of *Trans, Tranz, Tranz, Tranz, Traverse*, 2011. Performer: Reed Esslinger. Jean-Paul Slusser Gallery, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

The threads are not static however. On the far side of the mediating screen the performer sits and begins to pull one thread at a time creating the tension of a stringed instrument or pulled hair. The threads do not resist but slide through and succumb to being looped around each other in a new form of organization: They are pulled from their isolated passage through the screen and integrated into a garment that eventually envelopes the performer like a layer of skin.



Detail shot of end of the 3 week long performance of *Trans, Tranz, Travz, Travs, Traverse*, 2011. Jean-Paul Slusser Gallery, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

The threads leave a black, powdery residue on the pristine white screen. Charcoal swirls hover momentarily over the penetrating thread each time it is pulled another few inches, articulating the slow curls of air movement in the otherwise stillness. The soot is scraped off the thread as it traverses spilling down the side of the fabric leaving a stain, a shadow of their passage.



Trans, Tranz, Travz, Travrs, Traverse, 2011.
Detail of performance.



Detail of *Filter*, (component of thesis exhibition),
2012. Installation view.

“Trans” is the first occasion that I used time to talk about belonging. The space, as divided by the sculptural elements and animated by the live performance, was a way to talk about the tendency to organize, communicate, and re-present the human experience in the form of diametrically opposing forces. Black/white, either/or, foreigner/native, “Us”/ “Them,” are the poles to which we gravitate in order to take comfort in times of uncertainty. What I wasn’t able to articulate was the broad area of grey that described the experience of standing between one side and the other. In *Trans*, the matter moved through, left its mark and became whole on the other side. I soon realized that the screen is where I stood.

Betweenness

'Even if it floats in the river for one hundred years, a log can never become a crocodile.'

-Paul Stoller quoting a West African expression in
The Power of the Between

Finding the place required a fair amount of asking and turning around and quick embarrassments of starting down the wrong alleyway and realizing (upon smelling hot oil and wilting chop-suey) that this was not where I could get my residency status approved. About 50 meters from the intersection of Rue Bons Enfants and Rue Augustin Archambaud was a wrought-iron gate, about 30 centimeters ajar. The rods, thick with layers of dark enamel were about the diameter of the swollen fingers that grasped them (hoping desperately that this was at last it). The vertical lines reached up somewhat higher than the residential lots to either side. The oval crest of a governmental entity anchored the dignity of this gate whose grandeur dwarfed the small cluster of wood paneled concrete buildings beyond it. The gate seemed not to open or close habitually, so I squeezed through, disregarding the potential reading of my actions as trespassing.

Set within an overgrown courtyard, the cement driveway seemed to be crumbling back into the volcanic matter from which it was cast as it sloped down to the right. Although I glanced at the other buildings, all equally empty of life, my steps along the path coerced my body in the direction of the low rectangle at the end of the path. The building was awkwardly attempting to bridge the officialness of its office with the folkiness of its public through its architecture: this generic structure had a cheap tin imitation of the lace-like carved wood fringe- a reference to "Cases Créoles" the kind of wooden houses of early settlers of Réunion Island. Directly below this were the windows of the French doors which allowed a generous view into the plain interior: blank beige walls, a crowding of seats along the perimeter squeezed out of the center by several massive desks flush against each other creating a huge surface area but no practical access to their function much less the ability to traverse the room. I wondered how a pregnant woman would even approach what seemed to be the head desk. As my eyes adjusted from far to near sight, they discovered a piece of dimpled office paper with faded marker serving as the only indication that I had at last found my destination.

***The Sous-Préfecture of Saint Pierre.
Hours of operation 8 a.m. to 1 p.m. Mondays ONLY***

It was 6:40 -- it was Monday -- I had found it. As I held in the breath of satisfaction, scratchy footsteps of high heels braving that driveway stopped suddenly and then their owner brushed past my shoulder heading straight for the spot directly to the right of the door. Apparently this spot was 'first in line' and her sideways glance and clenched handbag confirmed her purpose. Other steps follow within seconds, it seems, as cattle let out of a coral. Perplexed at the rush (for there was an hour and a half before the doors would be unlocked) and never wanting to appear mindless in a herd, I scan the courtyard for a place to sit and go through my folder again. Bank account statement- check-notarized letter from landlords- check- proof of employment- check- passport- check... I shuffle the pages, reordering them in an ever-evolving logic of organization, shifting papers almost as often as my heavy body on the chunk of concrete I had found to rest.

The heat is stifling and imposing like the grandmère who heaps on thick blankets despite the searing skin of a feverish body; a heat intensified by the approaching mid morning sun from which those who have spent time, indeed lived within this volcanic crater from their birth, would repel, dash away, finding any barrier (the sports pages of the Journal de l'île, the side of a building, a broad banana leaf) with which to block the very object of desire for many a pale vacationer.

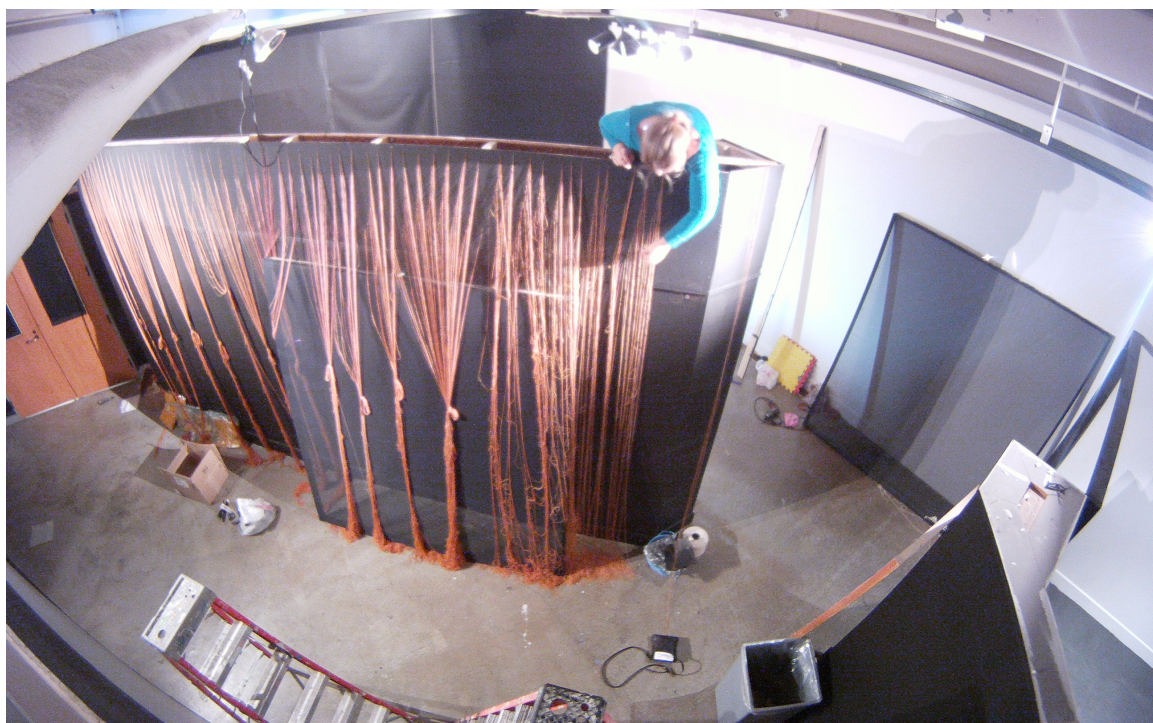
10:36 - The gates are rolled aside (they do move after all!) a wide, dark grey BMW ambles into the courtyard, tilts as it rolls towards the waiting group of people on the careening path. A middle age woman in a dark suit emerges tensely from the driver's side, tugs down at her jacket's hem, and gathers an armful of folders as she heads into the crowd. I adjust the strap supporting the bulge on my abdomen, contemplating following her now or waiting until the crowd thins. The air is tense as it is hot, bodies do not move out of her way, heads look up in relief and disgust as she fumbles with the keys and makes the assertion "No one may enter until I have set up my desk... in about 5 minutes." Eyes roll. Sighs are pushed out of tense lips. Crossed arms tighten a little more. Finally we are permitted to enter and as if reversing the events of hours earlier, the crowd pushes inward, fighting for a good place in line. Eventually everyone has received a number, the dust settles, and nerves are internalized again.

In this room masses of humid air hover around the shoulders of immobile bodies. I am seated third from the door along the western wall which is lined in its entirety with narrow-seated plastic chairs. The heat causes a geiser of sweat out of the pores upon even the slightest contact between the external sides of two arms at once fermenting my armpits as my limbs bolster my weak frame. There is no space between bodies, which have all generally assumed a slumped posture, reflecting their state of being: somewhere between sullen and anxious. Most of the people present seem to endure the slippery and itchy contact with each other- there are greater concerns at hand. The conversation in the room is kept to a low mumble between a couple across from where I am sitting, an occasional shriek from the infant in my lap or the insistent pleading of a toddler for coka or his sisters plush nounou. By contrast the woman at the desk seems to bellow her instructions: "Non, Monsieur, you are going to have to come back with more sufficient evidence of your conjugal relations..."

"Excusez-moi, Mademoiselle, is there a WC here?" A low creaking of her seat and feint crease along side the corner of her mouth, the young Malagasy woman next to me presses her papers deep into her lower abdomen as she gestures with the other hand "Là-bàs." She seems to be enduring the same general discomfort of knowing that her status is also quite literally in limbo.

The membrane

Recurrent in this body of work has been a broad flat surface. I have experimented with the plane as porous, impermeable, solid, and pliant. In all of these cases it has been defined through its relationship to thread and the subsequent interactions with the body. In the exhibition the visual motifs of membrane, garment, and threads exist in each installation as well as their corresponding text. I use the membrane, the garment, and threads as material manifestations of “indexicals;” linguistic expressions, (like “this” or “that”), whose reference shifts from context to context, in order to acknowledge the subjective and slippery nature of interpretation. Whether a wall, or screen, or viewfinder, the membrane is in between mitigating the events on either side.



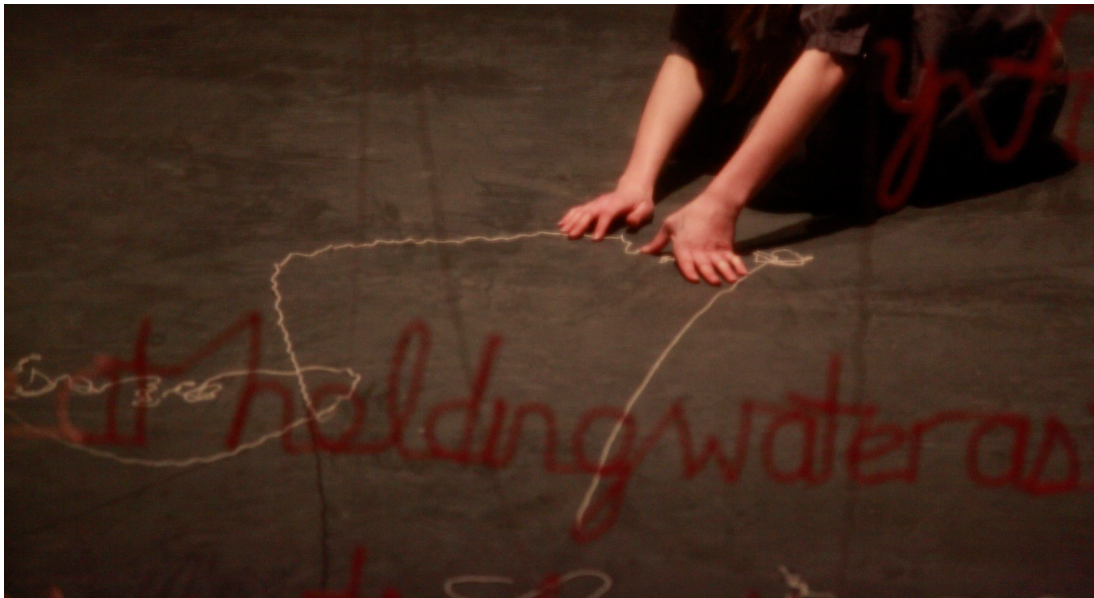
Process of installing “Filter” component of Per^FORM |at/within/beyond| BOUNDARY February 28, 2012.

In discussion of betweenness and anthropology, one inevitably evokes Victor Turner’s liminality. Often referring to a rite of passage, “liminality” is a way of locating a person’s state or position in cultural space. Turner writes that those standing at the threshold are “are necessarily ambiguous” and in limbo. Turner’s terminology is borrowed however from a much 19th century Belgian folklorist van Gennep who used it to “denominate the second of three stages in what he called a ‘rite of passage’... The three stages [van Gennep defined] as (1) separation (from ordinary social life); (2) margin or limen (meaning threshold), when the subjects of ritual fall into a limbo between their past and present modes of daily existence; and (3) re-aggregation, when they are ritually returned to secular or mundane life either at a higher status level or in an altered state of consciousness or social being.”¹²

¹² Turner, 1979: 466-467.

Being between one's native culture and that which one has encountered, such that one is no longer solely a member of one group nor of another, is a concept corroborated by a number of immigrants I've crossed paths with. Yeshitela Mamo, an Ethiopian who has spent the last 36 years in Italy rented me a room in the summer of 2002 while I was studying at the Università dei Stranieri di Perugia. In the evenings over pasta or injera, he often would talk of his African blood boiling due to certain "typically Italian" circumstances (as he put it), whereas his Italianized mannerisms would belie his extensive years as an expat every time he returned to Addis Ababa. Since then I have gathered anecdotes of the long term process of assimilation/resistance of resident aliens- no matter where they hail from, where they've landed, or under what circumstances, the story teller always alludes to the dual edge of privileged and haunted vantage points.

Paul Stoller, an anthropologist who describes in The Power of the Between a retrospective view of the lessons he learned over many years (and locations) of fieldwork, has been influential to me upon returning to Michigan. He writes that the confusion that churns while living for an extended period abroad, especially as one realizes that one is neither insider nor outsider, but somewhere in the nebulous in between can "have several existential repercussions."¹³ Living in the margins is exclusive in its sense of both alienation and privilege. While not really fitting in to either social group one also has access to each- her body's presence or mouth's narration fabricating a bridge between disparate communities. I write ethnographic texts based on my time living immersed in Réunionese culture as much for its value as an analytical tool as an added texture in the sensory experience of the installation. I juxtapose these stories with the actions, materials, and spaces of Per^FORM [at/within/beyond] BOUNDARY; the superimposed narrative becomes a way of decoding.



Still from Performance in *Barrier* installation a component of Per^FORM [at/within/beyond] BOUNDARY. Performer: Anya Klapischak. on March 9, 2012. Photo credit Peter Leix.

¹³ Stoller, 2009: 3.

**Questioning What We Know:
(Inaccurate Translations and Multiple Realities)**

I began investing my efforts of assimilation by examining language, believing the attainment of a certain level of linguistic dexterity would give me an “in” on social circumstances. Surely greetings would lead to conversations and those interactions might lead to friendship and therefore greater intimacy. I returned to Réunion after my first year in the MFA program at University of Michigan with ethnographic fieldwork in mind. Primarily I sought to learn as much Réunionese Creole as possible- a task virtually impossible off the island due to the fact that it is seldom written.¹⁴ I soon confronted a number of setbacks. First, Creoles know the exclusive nature of their language and they wield a strong resistance to an outsider’s attempt to enter their community through the fact that language is not a conglomeration of words, but a pulsating system of gestures, intonations, insinuations, and shared context. Of course all languages involve these nonverbal elements, but Reunionese Creole has the added camouflage of appearing like an approximation of Standard French. I had a good head start in my quest to “learn” Réunionese Creole due to my three previous years living on the island. Perhaps because I was not fluent in standard French when I first arrived, I somehow slid into a space of rich imagery and contradictory terminology.

My version of written Reunionese Creole¹⁵	Transliterated from approximations in standard French	What it really means (=translation)	The context in which it is said	What’s implied but not overtly said
<i>Là pli i tombe, ta leur té po’ fariner</i>	The rain, it’s falling, a while ago it was like flour sifting	Now it’s raining even though this morning there was a light mist	While visiting a friend’s house, having stayed too long	The speaker wants to leave and is finding an excuse
<i>la boug, i sa bat en carré</i>	The -?-, he this (to hit) a square	The guy is going to go for a walk	Gossiping about suspected infidelity of a neighbor	The person talking about the man conjectures that he will go to find other lovers

¹⁴ There have been recent attempts to legitimize Réunionese Creole (RC): efforts to establish a universalized written version of it for the purpose of enabling public offices and commercial venues to employ written RC in addition to or instead of Standard French. The heart of this movement is to legitimize (and I think concretize) Réunionese heritage; a declaration of a shared sense of identity. There is much resistance to it, however, ironically from Creoles themselves: attempted transliterations of what is an oral tradition feels artificial. RC is intimate, family-centered, and the public use of a language of the hearth and bosom of a community feels at worst oppressive and at best uncomfortable.

¹⁵ This is based on one of the more prominent versions though nothing has been agreed upon for, among other reasons, the above mentioned conflicts of interest.

A- <i>Oussa ou sa va la?</i>	A- Where this -ou this go there?	A- Where are you going?	A is irritated by B who is going out, leaving the house	A asks why B is leaving (not where). B lies because there is no upstairs, and A responds “get lost” find someone else to piss off
B- <i>Moin? mi sa mont en ler comerer.</i>	B- Me? me go up in the air gossip with...	B- I am going upstairs to visit with her		
A- <i>Aller rode un camarade po ou!</i>	A- Go -??- a comrade for -ou	A- Go find yourself a friend		

I came to understand the level of meaning shown in the middle column after a relatively short period of time immersed in the schools and neighborhoods of Réunion. The subtext, as illuminated by the fourth and explicated by the fifth column, started to surface after I had lived there for nearly three years and within the complex dynamic of being a foreign daughter-in-law to a close-knit Creole family.¹⁶ The border zones of what I thought I understood about social etiquette began to dissolve and I soon found myself confused by the multiple realities I was privy to. As soon as thought I was able to distinguish sarcasm from sincerity, deception from forthrightness, material from metaphor, I would slip right back out into the realm of naïve observer.

Multiple realities, of course, exist within distinct and permeable universes of meaning. From a phenomenological perspective, the nature of your experience ... is the key to reducing distances between universes of meaning. As experience expands with time, the boundaries of the universes may begin to intersect creating an arena or shared space and interpretation. Some critics argue, of course, that experience may or may not result in increased awareness, let alone personal transformation. And yet some of the best and most challenging descriptions of cultural practice come from scholars, like Evans-Pritchard, who have spent long periods of time in the field.

- Paul Stoller, 2009: 31-32.

Language functions on several levels in my work because of its paradoxically concrete and inaccurate nature. Like the basic building blocks of language, the components of my installations function as symbols whose active engagement creates meaning. Like words, or even sounds, the context in which the threads, membranes, residues exist reveals their purpose. Weaving therefore becomes a liminal act, communicating from one end of the loom to the other the nature of its cloth. Like a body through a crowd or a conversation over time, the threads tug, shift, pluck, and slip in and out of a sense of belonging.

Kimsooja, is a contemporary Korean artist also uses textiles both literally and as metaphors, subtly folding in our relationship to space and time. In *A Needle Woman*, we see the artist herself

¹⁶ Most Réunionese families are close by virtue of living in an inherently insular community, often even in physical proximity as families historically settled near each other within a nook of the same ravine.

filmed from behind, wearing a long grey dress and set in the middle of 8 urban landscapes: standing in the middle of busy streets in Delhi, Shanghai, Lagos and Tokyo. The needle in the piece's title refers to the gender loaded tool as well as to the compass needle, her body is immobile and points in a singular direction, accentuated by the bustling scene around her.



17

Here, unlike her *Bottari* series, where she uses cloth (traditional Korean bed linens in bundles), she is taking the cloth out of the material realm. In her own words: “Cloths are more than matter, they touch the skin and are one with the living body. I regard that body [of cloths] as even having a soul...” She continues, “...I suppose I was attracted to the cloths as it was a part of my life. It also had an inside and an outside which permitted me to have an ongoing conversation or interaction through the process of needlework.”¹⁸

For Kimsooja, actual needlework is a conversation with the surface and in *A Needle Woman*, she becomes the needle sewing through the cloth's surface. I see *A Needle Woman* as a kind of social statement by the very fact that she is not engaging with her environment as a person but as a tool. Her immobile stance both anchors and directs our understanding of the human movement around her; her inaction becomes an intimate interaction with the swarm of people moving around her because of the elicited metaphor. I intended for the performers in *Per^FORM |at/within/beyond| BOUNDARY* to not be a specific identity but for their body to represent any person. Neither Kimsooja nor myself employ the body as a sign of personhood, but rather the action, or in my case the gesture and event caused by that gesture allude to the organic evolution of being human.

¹⁷ *A Needle Woman* - Delhi, 2000, Shanghai 2000, Tokyo 1999, Lagos 2001. Part of the 8 cities performances, (1999-2001), 6:33 video loop.

¹⁸ Soo Ja Kim quoted in Hyunsun, Tae, 2000

Transformation

“If ‘culture’ is not an object to be described, neither is it a unified corpus of symbols and meanings that can be definitively interpreted. Culture is contested, temporal, and emergent. Representation and explanation—both by insiders and outsiders—is implicated in this emergence”

- James Clifford from “Introduction: Partial Truths,”
in *Writing Culture* .1986: 19.

“Ote ma fille! ou la pa honte?” The giggling and jovial tone of her voice was more euphemism than a joke: this particular intonation rises up an octave at the end of the question.

“Hey Girl! aren’t you ashamed?...” I heard again, “What’s that for anyhow?” The cause for such a comment (for this is more a declaration than a question) was that I was bent over, picking up a round, partially crushed container. When I heard Nathalie’s quip and the subsequent affirmations I quickly redressed myself, tucking the piece of trash between my palm and my thigh. While inverted, I only caught the tail end of the elbow jabbing and eyebrow-raising exchanged among the happenstance audience and I told myself the whisps of “pshhh” was really the prickly cane leaves rubbing against each other in the on-shore breeze.

I decided not to indulge her with my attraction to the scratchy texture of the weathered object. (I had been collecting such objects for as long as I can remember, but my habit had dwindled significantly since picking up debris was met with more overt disgust in present company). Even less effective would have been trying to explain my fascination with the metaphorical implications of the object’s former life as a beverage container juxtaposed to its current location on the edge of a ravine. (The very ravine where her grandmother and great-grandmother had gone to quench their thirst and wash their clothes). I knew that within certain circles, academic or artistic for etc., I could get away with such “odd” actions and even such convoluted explanations. But here, now, I couldn’t justify the dirt under my fingernails or the presence of a discarded container in my personal bag. Ramping up my defenses in times such as these, I had learned to swallow the burning humiliation instead of fighting (selfishly) to be understood. The amount of energy and emotional wherewithal it took to justify my actions wouldn’t satisfy or clarify much. My snooty air and funny words, (as I had come to understand they were interpreted), were about as effective at holding water as the deflated forms I was routinely attracted to.

Nathalie and I were both born in 1981 to strong, self-reliant parents who taught us the virtue of manual labor and warned us against the vice of leisure. We are both mothers now. Contribution to family operations is unquestionable and routine: gathering and sorting food stuffs, cooking for large gatherings, mashing up small portions for toothless gums. We are sisters, often encountering the frictions of siblings’ inability to see eye to eye. But we are not blood. We do not speak the same language. We do not find the same things beautiful, or worthwhile. And we rear our children with as separate a set of guidelines as might be expected from two women growing up on opposite sides of the globe. To further connect (or distance) matters of our relations, we were born in twin cities: She, Saint Paul of Réunion Island, an Outer Seas Department of France located in the Indian Ocean, and I, St. Paul, Minnesota, an urban center located on the great artery of the northern United States, the Mississippi River.

“Ou la pa honte?” in Réunionese Creole (“Tu n’as pas honte?” in standard French) is an expression commonly used to ask why someone is doing something deviating from the social norm. My understanding of the term has followed a pendular path spanning the five years I have known Nathalie’s culture. I found it difficult to swallow the first time I heard it, interpreting the word “honte” with the full weight of “shame” and the associations of exclusion and downtrodden self-esteem. Perhaps this is because I transliterated the phrase at first, relying on a word-for-word portal

into the unknown. As I observed the phrase uttered at seemingly inconsequential moments, (among friends in casual conversation for example), I began to understand the nuances of the expression. It could express sarcasm as well as or instead of condemnation. As I have been the object of the comment under circumstances that highlight my foreignness, I began to tune in to the additional underlying inferences.

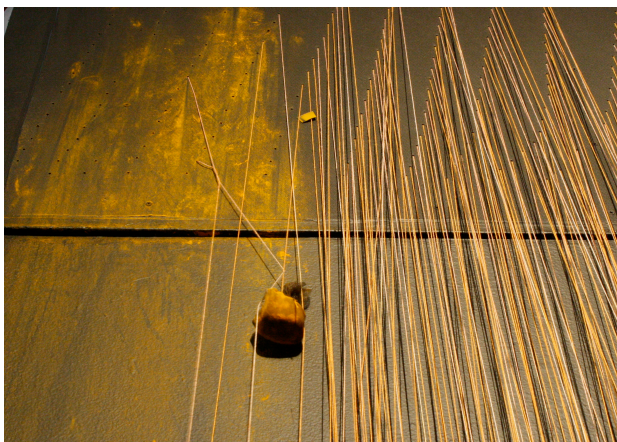
Although superficially playful, the phrase can be used to obliquely comment on another person's membership in the social group or even to his or her sanity. (A similar phrase "Ou lé fou ou quai?"; "Are you crazy or what?", carries similar implications). Whereas the practice of ladi lafé (roughly translated as "gossip") mostly discusses persons who are not present, the use of the phrase "Ou la pa honte?" is uncharacteristically confrontational. Perhaps this is one reason why it surprised me. As many other aspects of Réunionese culture confirm a general aversion to confrontation, this phrase: "Tu n'as pas honte?" jumps out as an exception to the perceived "rule." The question is abrasive in that it is directed at someone who is out of line, and furthermore, it is quintessential "moukattage" (making fun/ belittling someone).

As subtle tools for prodding and pruning social membership, I realized that these mechanisms maintain a sense of unity and appropriateness. I am still sensitive to the sense of mockery and exclusion that the question carries with it. However I have come to accept that Nathalie asking if I wasn't ashamed by my behavior was somehow confirming my integration in the group. My choice to no longer explain or hide my deviant behavior reflects a protective layer of callus.

The Exhibition

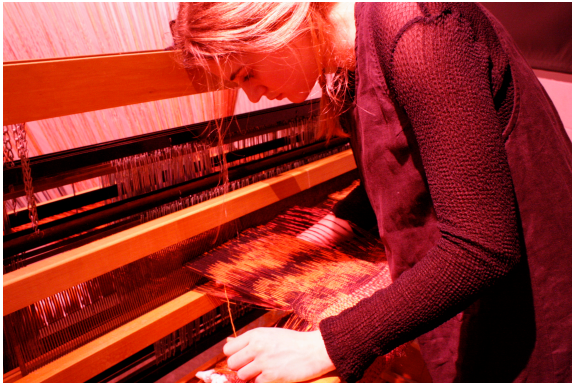


The corridor squeezes one through two cascades of vertical lines, hindering any attempt to linger and watch. On one wall, threads are methodically grouped and drawn up into knots by enormous hands. Blue stain that eventually coats the laboring fingers, depicting the process of accumulating residue but does not leave its trace on the surrounding architecture. Opposite this thin and luminous image is a thick, black wall. Hundreds of golden threads throb and quiver in the viewer's periphery- optical trickery on the retina conspires with the ceiling-mounted air vents to produce a delicate instability to this otherwise solid wall. The yellow cage is made up of individual threads drawn taut from their anchored base to their insertion into the wall itself.



Mirroring the image of hands, the physical threads also begin to climb, although this time individually and through mysterious agency (no hands are visible). Over two weeks the threads are uprooted once every five minutes or so. A fist size sack, filled with pulverized turmeric root and volcanic sand, provides resistance, and leaves a residue, to an otherwise imperceptible passage through a perforated wall.

The threads disappear from this vantage point but are gathered on the other side by a woman at a loom. Basking in a pink glow, she steps away from her weaving, follows the outer most thread on the edge of the cloth back through the reed, the heddles, under the back beam, and up to the hole in the wall above her head corresponding to the other side. She pulls, arm over arm, until the released thread slips into her grasp, ready to be pulled out the front of the loom and inserted into the weaving.



In the corner above and behind her, a voice bellows, as if instructing or surveying her labor. The voice reverberates as if through a tin can, an authoritarian guise to an otherwise personal account of discomfort. The positioning of the speakers emulates the downward projection of an intercom's announcement; the metallic tone only further alienates her as she methodically persists with her arduous task.

Whether the bag bursts heroically, unwinds and sifts down the wall, or is abandoned at the bottom of the accumulating heap, it is not permitted entry to the other side. The thread that so intensely wound her long arm around his neck, is snapped and tugged until she finally relinquishes her load. As the cage of threads recedes, the sand and turmeric sediments build. Swirls of yellow dust slide over shells of burst bags, scatter their ashes into the aisle, and testify to an ironic consequence of disintegration: that which was cast aside is now unified by the pull of all particles great and small to the earth. The mound: a body made whole out of the gathering of all that is cast away.



Performed Space



Filter performed by Kathryn Bonsted, Chantal Gibson, and Rebecca Brown, during the course of the exhibition (March 9-24, 2012). Kathryn Bonsted (pictured here) inserts the warp she has just pulled through the wall back into the weft.

I weave because weaving is at once integrative and transformational. The most direct metaphor lies within weaving's function: to gather multitudes of fibrous entities, too fragile on their own, into an interlocking wholeness. The threads form a membrane; a wall, a skin, or a garment to envelop the body. Like the accumulative sequence of words into sentences, the fabric tells the story of its creation. My intrigue with weaving, however, lies primarily in the process: the machine itself provides order, establishes structure, and serves as a threshold through which the materials must pass in order to become part of something. The end product of my current body of work, therefore, is not self-contained or meant to endure time unchanged, like a tapestry or blanket, but is literally moving.

My thesis exhibition "Per^FORM at/within/beyond BOUNDARY" is one work. As viewers move through the gallery, they encounter spaces whose very materiality is involved in transformation. The compartmentalized spaces that make up exhibition spill over into each other, whether leaving a literal or implied residue. Although the action is different in each one, the components are essentially the same: there is a membrane (permeable/ porous/ pliant etc.) there is thread, (a line that materializes or delineates action), and an event. The separate spaces are expressions of a common theme: making and unmaking.



View of *Vested for Apotropaic Breath*, 2011 in third space of the *Thesis Exhibition*.



Aerial view of *Barrier* installation. The performance was only viewed through the screen. Performed March 9-24, 2012. Pictured here: Anya Klapischak.

Threads pierce, unravel, and dissolve the architecture of the space and of sculptural components (including abstracted versions of the loom itself) in order to elicit what architect Juhani Pallasmaa refers to as the embodied wisdom in architecture. Just as Pallasmaa points out “Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy [that] the human body [is] at the centre of the experiential world” I aim to create environments that materialize and perform the embodied experiences of

adaptation, resistance, and transformation.¹⁹ Although there is a performer causing the action in the space, the “body” exists more within the narrative and the architecture than within the identity of the performer.



Installation shot of *Filter* performed March 9-24, 2012. Pictured here: Kathryn Bonsted.

Within Victor Turner’s discussion of liminality is “public reflexivity,” referring to the way a community seeks “to portray, understand, and then act on itself,” which may often be a performance of some kind. What I found intriguing about this was the idea of *performance as language*. Perhaps another way of explaining nonverbal communication, the fact that Turner explains the dramatic actions as a way of confirming identity relates to greater themes in my work: Social fusion through symbolic gestures and *identity AS process*.

The languages through which a group communicates itself to itself are not, of course, confined to talking codes: they include gestures, music, dancing, graphic representation, painting, sculpture, and the fashioning of symbolic objects. They are dramatic, that is literally “doing” codes. Public reflexivity is also concerned with what I have called “liminality.” This term, literally “being-on-a-threshold,” means a state or process which is betwixt-and-between the normal, day to day cultural and social states and processes of getting and spending, preserving law and order, and registering structural status. Since liminal time is not controlled by the clock it is a time of enchantment when anything might, even should,

¹⁹ Pallasmaa, 2005: 40.

happen. Another way of putting it would be to say that the liminal in socio-cultural process is similar to the subjunctive mood in verbs - just as mundane socio-structural activities resemble the indicative mood. Liminality is full of potency and potentiality.

- Victor Turner, 1979: 465-466.

Although I didn't think in literal terms when making this body of work about this concept of performing identity, I realize that the nature of Reunionese society being in constant search for a cohesion of cultural identity is a macrocosm for the internal shifts I experienced as a foreigner. Françoise Vergès' scholarship and reflection on her own culture's grips with its identity are poignant:

The Réunionnais are still constituting themselves through the experience of articulating their being-in-common, of living groups that are continuously transformed by the arrival of new groups. When the cultural reference of a community is a métissage forged through slavery, *marronage*, workers' struggles against capitalism and colonialism, and refusal to submit to racial regulations that forbade métissage, then the "people" are not defined by a founding myth but elaborated through a continuous social transformation, informed by resistance to incorporation.

- Françoise Vergès, 1999: 12).

The Me that is Happening



Detail of *Vested for Apotropaic Breath*, 2011.

Our language encourages the distinction between body and “I.” We have no single word that allows us to say, “I-body.” At the most we might say “my body” in much the same way we might refer to “my car,” implying that one’s body is property but certainly not *self*. Our language supports the notion that our body is an object: something that happens to me, rather than the “me that is happening.

- Kepner, 1987: 7

“Vested for Apotropaic Breath” started as a technical investigation of weaving a jacket- the sleeves and body simultaneously- on a loom. Passing the weft through the back and front of the garment, then around the back and front of the sleeves in a circular path, weft by weft, line by line, I wrote this epidermis under the tension of an eight harnessed machine. Connecting the sleeves to the body starts with an act of destruction: cutting off the warp threads one by one (undoing the very means by which a loom holds threads in order to weave), and then weaving them back into the body. Once it has been reinserted into the weft, each thread exits the garment, suturing another millimeter of the seam. I was interested in the notion that a body lay flat, taut, lifeless, (a potential body), but especially that the loom was translating the body from individual strands to integrated cloth. Any weaving mechanism transforms, but in

this case, the strands are cut off and *re*incorporated. The garment, the skin that envelopes a body, ultimately springs forth, life breathed into it, once it is completely through the loom.

“Apotropaic” from Greek *apotropaios* turning away (evil), means having the power to prevent evil or bad luck. Associations of magic, from singular inexplicable occurrences to the ubiquitous mystique of birth, lend themselves to this talisman that is neither ascending nor descending, but simply moving. The direction, and the association of ascent (attainment of some hierarchical achievement) or descent (condemnation, loss of control) is less important than the notion of suspension. The sculpture provides a crystallized glimpse at an otherwise tenuous state of being: in between. It is when we are between one state and another that we may have the most clarity, and therefore certainty, of where we sit, what we believe, and an ability to entertain both one’s native world view and that of another culture. Betweenness is not a state, but rather a movement.

In a way, we can say that nothing is ever static or secure because literally, on an atomic level, our parts are constantly moving. An immobile body hides the gushing of gastric fluids, throbbing of muscular tissue, and the transfer of molecular bits through cell walls. Our thoughts flutter incessantly and our definition of ourselves in relation to the world around us is a constant negotiation. Movement is the only certainty: movement delineates wholeness.



Oscar Muñoz, *Narcissus*. Video installation. 2001–2002

Perhaps the most significant aspect of the work in Per^FORM |at/within/beyond| BOUNDARY is its instability and inconclusiveness. Reflecting the tenuous ground of searching for place or purpose, the various processes of undoing lend metaphorical weight. I am intrigued with the ephemeral and unstable nature of Oscar Muñoz’s works. They oscillate between presence and absence, but ultimately the relationship between making and unmaking is tense and self-negating, whereas the undoing is what enables the doing in my work. José

Roca, a curator for Muñoz's exhibition, *Imprints for a Fleeting Memorial*, describes his work as "transcend[ing] the specific anecdote, as well as the particular and defined historical fact, to allude to the human condition and the fragility of life itself."²⁰ In "*Narcissus*" a portrait created by sifting charcoal dust onto the surface of water in a sink slowly recedes and distorts as the water goes down the drain. Like many of Muñoz's works, the destruction or undoing of the image is what offers valuable insight.

* * *

In the *Barrier* performance words float in the air but are strangely stiff and lay flat against a plane. A woman kneels, pulls a thread, and slowly unravels the words, "justify" "clarify" "instead" "holding" "against," etc. She then turns her attention to the ground beneath her and presses the thread into its surface.

The story narrated in this space, of which the words embroidered on the screen are derived, is one of humiliation, misunderstanding, efforts to assimilate. The erasure of the words is violent: they are **plucked** out of the surface. But it is also a story one of empowerment, resistance, resilience, and a reclaiming of agency. The performer can choose which words/ phrases to unravel and when to leave a remnant of the word in place. Her "writing" is a physical action



Anya Klapischak Performing in *Barrier*. March 9, 2012.

²⁰ Roca, 2011

and bears the consequence of marking. The pattern she presses the thread back into the ground does not form text in a literal sense, (she is not making intelligible letter forms of any language) but is charged with the essence of inscription. She is reacting, interpreting, and inventing the meaning of the words that she is transferring from one plane to another.



Anya Klapischak Performing in *Barrier*. March 9, 2012. Photo credit Peter Leix.



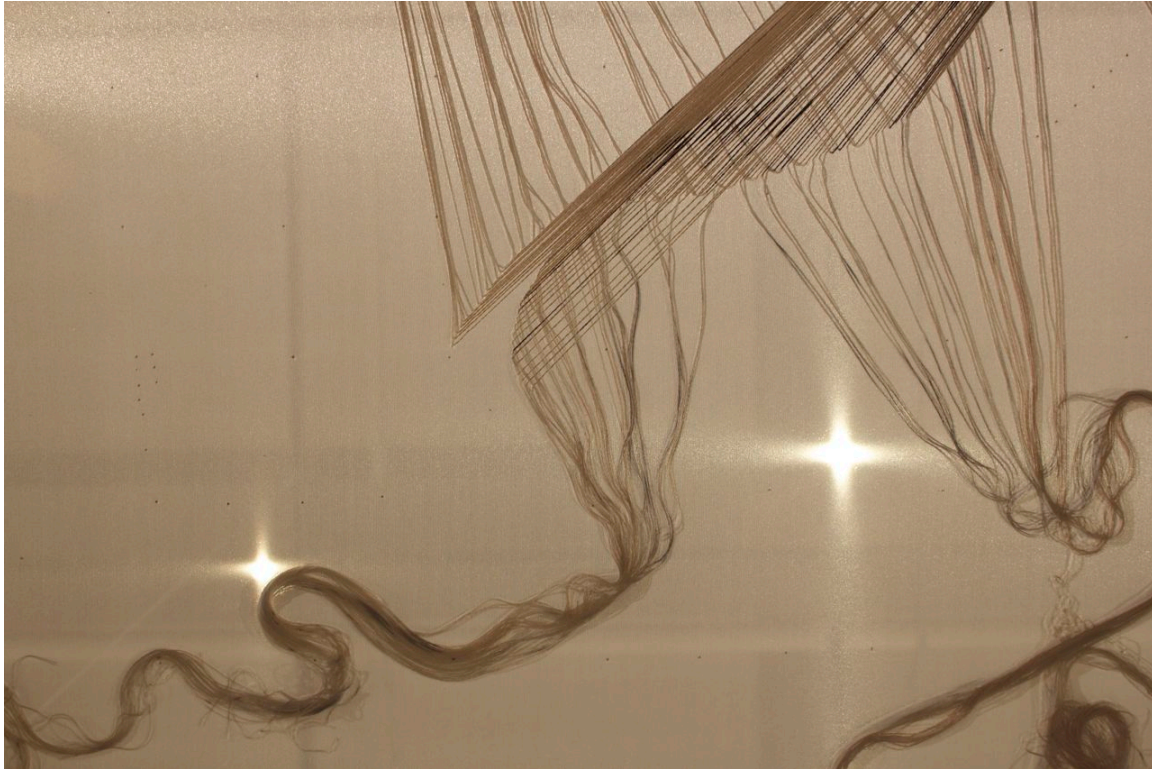
Arrival Scene: (Part Deux)

Process acted out literally in the previous two spaces (*Barrier* and *Filter*) is implied in the third, *Threshold*, (below). The object is not an object: it is an image of process where the garment is never finished. The “work,” then, is a verb not a noun. I resist the notion that this object is complete, static, a period to the statement of the exhibition. It’s unfinished itself; The stillness of the thread here leaves us with an unspecified direction of movement- the figure may move up, or down, but certainly *through* this threshold.



Installation shot of *Vested for Apotropaic Breath*, 2011.

Unraveling, disintegration, and erasure can be means of talking about certainty. I am fascinated by the historical categorization of *self* and *other* in anthropology, how socially constructed perceptions of power and authenticity spill over into an individual’s sense of belonging, and the erosions and reconstructions of the very personal arena of belief structure and spirituality. Destructive actions may diminish the structural integrity of the starting point, but this too is a story- a transformative one. Unstitching, unwinding, plucking out, sloughing off, grinding down, smearing, filtering, are all forms of selection. Which parts do we hold on to and which do we cast aside?



Detail of *Vested for Apotropaic Breath*, 2011.

Connaître and savoir, distinct notions in French referring to familiar versus certain knowledge, merge into a singular English translation (to know). In Reunionese Creole, knowledge is always familiar as it is expressed “koné;” an irony found in the impenetrable walls that block an outsider’s true understanding of the turbulent experience of a creolized community. The journey to know “otherness” can be confrontational and thus requires tenderness, a permeability of mind and body.

The different components of the exhibition seem to have in common a form of making and unmaking. Although the gesture may be simple and the actions directly linked, these various components challenge our desire, in fact our relentless quest for establishing certainty in our identity. They challenge too our expectations about the linearity of storytelling. Vestiges of the actions remain. But the gestures and the change that they create are key here. I am less interested in the constructed mechanisms that mediate them (architecture) or the final “product” (the residue). What I am questioning here is the notion of *identity AS process*. Finally, through this work, and especially as an artist groping at the world, I have been asking myself about the role that making and unmaking have as equal forms of knowledge.

I view ethnographic fieldwork as a balancing act between two vying forces: a desire for intimacy while professional purpose demands a distanced and analytic perspective. I am not an ethnographer but I am intrigued with the mission: to expose oneself, to analyze an “other,” and to translate the experience to a third entity. The ethnographic text becomes connective tissue, fusing the stories of observer & objectified in a document that endures time and bridges physical, cultural, and spiritual distance.

This installation spans six years, permeates three spaces, and unwinds the multitude of threads vesting the question of belonging. Social acceptance is a state of being we all strive for: to be understood, to be valued, to be part of the fabric of a collective story. As circumstances abrade, erase, or constrain the human psyche we respond creatively: adapting, rewriting, and emerging with a transformed sense of self.



Detail of *Filter* at end of exhibition. March 24, 2012

It is the intention of human organisms to seek relationship within [his or her] environment. Through this dynamic interaction, the organism changes and grows ‘. . . assimilating from the environment what it needs for its very growth’ (PHG, 1951, p. viii).’ And *how* the organism incorporates what is vital to its developing is through the creativity of adjusting or the spontaneous interacting of one with another to create something different and new. Any adjusting is creative insofar as it leads to integration: the unification of two unlike essences that are now made into a more inclusive whole. This is the experience of contacting; the quality of connecting with oneself and within the environment.

-Ruella Frank, 2001, 1.

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