PERFORMING IDENTITIES. REFRAMING CITIES AS MULTIFOCAL NARRATIVES FOR ART, PERFORMANCE AND THEATRE

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Abstract Drawing on David Joselit's critique of modernity in relation to the proprietary mindset that regulates the production and circulation of art on the art market, this article focuses on a few examples of artists employing gestures of displacement around techniques involving collage and montage – in various fields of expression from performance art, theatre, photography, installation to mixed media and sculpture and in relation to their spaces – to *declassify* the dominant perceptions of the real and history by exposing the arbitrary nature of social hierarchies and giving voice to those who are traditionally silenced. We will observe how these different approaches tackle, disrupt and offer an alternative to the commodified modes of spectatorship that in both the space of art and of the city (embodying and reflecting the mechanisms of modernity) perform a systematic dispossession of the other.
Keywords Site-specific, collage, performance, identity, embodied algorithm, possessive gaze.

Space. Distribution of places

As the onset of modernity prompted (with the development of cities among other outcomes of industrialisation) the emergence of a new political subject, the factory-working proletariat, this new setting went on to play a central role in shaping the art of the 19th and 20th century. In their rapid development, cities became not only focal points of intellectual discourse, but also a backdrop for the profound societal changes they triggered. The movement of art from private collections to museums, coupled with the reconfiguration and modernisation of cities through architecture and urban planning, informed the significant shifts reshaping art in relation to its newfound settings. The avant-garde movements are a perfect example of the pivotal role cities played in the development of art and theatre through the continuous

reconfiguration of spaces and of people's perception of (and place in) these spaces. It is in this context that art delved into themes associated with issues impacting the working class, particularly in the post-war reconstruction era which deepened the marginalisation of the working class. Artists who actively engaged with pressing contemporary issues turned both art and its physical surroundings into spaces of interrogation, challenging norms and opening up a dialogue on political and social problems. In this process, art moved away from traditional venues and, with that, cities turned into an actual stage for the presentation of art, oftentimes serving as unconventional canvases for artistic exploration and new forms of expression.

Artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles's conceptual art, for example, challenged the traditional notion of art viewed as a production of objects by redefining art in relation to the mundane gestures of providing care and the repetitive process of endless upkeep and maintenance entailed. Her *Washing/Tracks/Maintenance: Outside* (1973) performance consisted in a four-hour ritual of scrubbing the exterior staircase of the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art (Hartford, Connecticut), the only institution that accepted her performance proposal. The performance was carried out during the museum's open hours as a provocative gesture (of a white artist doing the "hands-on maintenance work that art institutions usually reserve for people of colour"[1]) which was intended as a critique of both the art institution in general and the overlooked labour of maintenance workers. A gesture that also connects the invisible effort that goes into the maintenance of a museum and the household chores women are routinely expected to carry out, an equally invisible labour hinted at by exposing into the very space of art the everyday gestures that go into the care and curation of any space. On a personal level, this association was informed by the realisation of how her own experience as a mother impacted her perceived role and identity as an artist in the society. Her performance reminisces the improvisational gesture of abstract expressionist action painters, but the dramatic strokes her mop and water palette leave on the surface of the concrete slabs are ephemeral and rendered invisible as soon as they evaporate. In her typewritten "Manifesto for Maintenance Art 1969!"[2] she opposes two basic systems: Development, which relates to the conventional concept of "pure individual creation" mainly associated with the (implicitly male) avant-garde, and Maintenance which refers to tasks mainly associated with women and domestic work: "keep the dust off the pure individual creation; preserve the new; sustain the change; protect progress; defend and prolong the advance; renew the excitement; repeat the flight." She insists here that the problem with our culture is that it values and rewards development, while maintenance is underpaid or not paid at all while it actually takes all the time. With that scope, the artist's work gradually extended beyond the confines of the art

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[1] Jillian Steinhauer, "How Mierle Laderman Ukeles Turned Maintenance Work into Art," *Hyperallergic* (10 February 2017): https://hyperallergic.com/355255/how-mierle-laderman-ukeles-turned-maintenance-work-into-art/.

[2] Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *MANIFESTO FOR MAINTENANCE ART, 1969! Proposal for an exhibition: "CARE"*. Written in Philadelphia, PA (October 1969):
https://queensmuseum.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Ukeles-Manifesto-for-Maintenance-Art-1969.pdf.

world, engaging with economic, environmental, and political issues revolving around the service work that routinely goes in the systemic maintenance that *keeps the city alive*. In 1978, as "the city was on the brink of bankruptcy, and sanitation workers (...) were between strikes,"[3] she was hired as an unpaid artist in residence by the New York City Department of Sanitation (a position she still holds today) where she collaborated with sanitation workers in the *Touch Sanitation Performance* (1979-1980), which involved shaking the hands of 8,500 sanitation workers in a symbolic gesture of reclaiming the city as a public space, while also seeking to bridge the gap between art and a working class that was no longer visible. Her project, which remains acutely relevant today, was featured in 2007 (in a 30 colour photography installation) in the Sharjah Biennial 8 on the topic "Still Life: Art, Ecology, and the Politics of Change" which stressed on the urgency to address the growing social and environmental issues caused by the ongoing trends of rapid urbanisation, excessive competition for power and resources, as well as unsustainable use of natural resources. Ukeles drew on this museal recontextualisation of her site-specific project in order to articulate a *public picture at mass urban scale* where the individual is also rendered visible and perceptible, she contends; not just the owners who have always been entitled to representation throughout the history of art, but also the *behind-the-scenes enablers and maintainers*.[4]

Another relevant example of experimentation and improvisation that challenged traditional theatrical conventions by rethinking the relation between art and its conventional space is the avant-garde theatre group, The Performance Group, founded in 1967 by Richard Schechner. For almost a decade, the group experimented with the concepts articulated in the academic journal *The Drama Review*, pushing the boundaries of performance and physical expression while exploring the relationship between actor, audience, and the physical space in performances that were often visceral, integrating and immersing audiences in the space of the performers. Schechner challenged traditional theatre norms by probing not only how theatre and society could be reshaped to resonate with the contemporary world but also by contemplating the creation of a new community model free from inequality. Traditional ideas, such as the playwright's authoritative role, the segregation of the stage from the audience, and linear plots driven by psychological character motivations, were deemed obsolete. A truly relevant performance had to be dynamic, embracing an open process that involved an articulation with current images and events, audience participation, multifocal scenarios, and a transformative enactment of community issues. Site-specific theatre not only transgressed the traditional limits of the performance space, transforming the entirety of a location into a dynamic stage, but also rejected the separation of performers and audience by fostering an ongoing organic negotiation of space which prompted a fluid interplay between actors and

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[3] Steinhauer, *Hyperallergic*.
[4] Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Sharjah Biennial 8 "Still Life: Art, Ecology, and the Politics of Change," Sharjah Art Foundation, 2007:
https://sharjahart.org/sharjah-art-foundation/projects/touch-sanitation-performance (accessed on 7 March 2024).

their surroundings.[5] For Schechner, each scene had the potential to actively shape its unique space, allowing the action to be devised organically in relation with and around the physical presence of the audience, which prompted site-specific theatre to turn the city streets into a stage. In actively integrating the performance into the urban fabric and blurring the conventional boundaries and segregation of spaces, site-specific theatre was also mirroring the interactive nature of modern consumerism. The shopping mall, with its carefully orchestrated layout encouraging visitor engagement where people navigate storefronts and various spaces as if each location were a distinct stage, served as an apt metaphor for this immersive, participatory approach to performance. Turning the streets into public arenas also carried political and civic significance as performances held in these spaces amplified social messages, echoing the spirit of civil rights marches and guerrilla theatre protests.[6]

In the following decades, as art moved away from its traditional venues and artists contributed to repurposing abandoned industrial structures in the city, they also unwittingly played a role in a gentrification process that started reshaping post-industrial urban landscapes around financial interests.[7] This reconfiguration has yet again significantly impacted art's perceived role in the society, as visual and performance artists changed their approach and working mechanisms by directly engaging with local communities, collaborating with residents to create art that reflects the experiences of the latter and challenges oppressive narratives or patterns of displacement, and in doing so they employed their art to document and critique the gentrification process itself, raising awareness about its negative impacts.

Drawing on Jacques Rancière's concept that art is inherently political, this text focuses on a few such examples of visual artists employing a performance mindset in challenging the normative narratives of the city. We wish to insist here that the French philosopher defines art as intrinsically political not because it directly advocates for specific political causes or ideologies according to an agenda, but because it can disrupt the established order of society and challenge its distribution of power. In Rancière's view, art has the potential to *declassify* the dominant perceptions of the real by exposing the arbitrary nature of social hierarchies and giving voice to those who are traditionally silenced. To this end, Rancière advances two key concepts that underpin his understanding of art's inherent political nature: the "partition of the sensible" and "partaking in the sensible."[8] The *partition of the sensible* refers to the way in which society divides up and labels into categories experiences, knowledge, and ways of being, and by doing this it establishes who is deemed capable of participating in public life and who is relegated to the margins. Art, according to Rancière, has the ability to disrupt this partition by introducing new ways of seeing and experiencing the world, a necessary gesture that contains the possibility of a redistribution of power and, with that, of a more inclusive society. On the

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5 Richard Schechner, "6 Axioms for Environmental Theatre," *The Drama Review*, Volume 12, Issue 3: Architecture/Environment (1968).

6 Richard Schechner, "Public Events for the Radical Theatre," *The Village Voice* (September 7, 1967).

7 Bob Dickinson, "Art and Urbanism," *Art Monthly*, No. 470 (October 2023): 11-14.

8 Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* (New York: Continuum, 2004).

other hand, *partaking in the sensible* refers to the process of being actively an integrated part of the public sphere, which involves acquiring the knowledge, skills, and ways of doing that are required to participate in the public discourse.[9] Drawing on Rancière's view that art can play a role in this process by providing marginalised groups with the tools they need to make their voices heard, we will focus on how an approach that involves gestures of deliberate displacement, repurposing, and reconfiguration of archive materials actively engages the viewer in an open dialogue, exposing and challenging established narratives while investigating the underrepresented or excluded communities within the city.

Montage. An archive of erased figures

In the prologue section to *Art's Properties*, David Joselit[10] addresses the current modes of spectatorship prompted not only by and around the excessive use of technology accompanying and assisting our every gesture or tracking our steps as we move about the geographies around us, but also by internalising the *aesthetics of machine vision* which in turn makes us behave like an *embodied algorithm*. If our movements and behaviour in a museum fall into predictable patterns created by what Joselit calls *assembly-line spectatorship* where time is spent "not in looking but in waiting"[11] for our turn to take a photograph of an artwork, how does that translate to our movements in the spaces we are distributed to in a city and how does our experience of being in a space change according to our purpose, place, role or reason for being there in the first place? How is the organisation and distribution of places in a city biased by the imperative to spend time moving with a purpose, not idly lingering to just gaze or to look around through the contemplative eyes of a *flâneur*? As Joselit aptly points out, the way museums have reorganised their narratives around the rhythm of the *possessive gaze* of a spectator whose aesthetic experience is regulated by *the imperative to photograph* has also *reorganised contemplation* by the "collapse of seeing into photographing"[12] which removes any duration, immediacy and presence from our experience and defers it to an archive stored digitally for future use or reference. But if our movements in a city are already guided and regulated by space planning algorithms curating an ideal mix of industrial, commercial, residential, and cultural sites and venues, refined to fluidify movement for efficacy reasons mostly dictated by pragmatic and economic concerns, how does that translate into a policing gesture? How do these normative gestures aiming for uniformity and the systematic dispossession of the other generate conditions for each other? And how may the current artistic practices be accomplices to this?

By organising and curating the urban landscape according to profit spaces we actually end up transplanting conditions of standardised spaces adapted to (various forms of) tourism

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[9] Ibid.

[10] David Joselit, *Art's Properties* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023).

[11] Ibid., xii.

[12] Ibid.

instead of adapting spaces to their residents' needs. This tendency to cater to diversity only in standardised and carefully controlled forms makes difference acceptable only in a commodified relationship, as part of a transactional contract that accepts the difference of the other only as a temporary (museumgoer, tourist) or predefined presence (what Joselit calls *segregational representation*) in the city, where they are welcome or accepted as long as they move on or limit their movement within certain preset norms. By dislocating the representational relations and language that have prompted the commodification of artworks, a space may be created for art to escape the ideological instrumentalisation that has shaped it into an instrument of colonisation of thought. According to Joselit, a progressive politics of art may disrupt, through gestures of *self dis-possession*, the forms of possessive individualism which stem from the (white, liberal) proprietary mindset that is excluding the historically dispossessed and has shaped not only the modern museum (and the configuration of the urban space we might add), but also the entire framework of modern and contemporary art. Such gestures are meant to displace the 'naturalised' idea of property as a defining aspect of modern art and open art towards a 'genuine commonality'. We are interested in observing how artists employing different tools operate a similar gesture meant to disrupt the (modern) mechanism of turning art into property as they explore and negotiate the idea of art as a public space that transcends culture and as a precarious tool employed to reach the reality of the present time and to claim a position or give form to a position in order to create a common comprehensive narrative. In David Joselit's view we need to move beyond the outdated concept of multiculturalism (which tends to flatten and homogenise cultural differences under the pretence of a multiculturalist humanism) in a way that allows us to embrace a more nuanced understanding of human diversity, one that recognizes the complexity and fluidity of identity and the entanglement, contamination, and impermanence of cultural forms.

One way of recasting art in terms other than proprietary is through organising a space that is temporary, thus escaping the commodification and museumification of artworks while unsettling relations of order and value. By challenging the idea that art should be confined to traditional spaces and setting up a temporary open access space in a venue not typically destined for art, Thomas Hirschorn's 'monuments' challenge traditional notions of where art should be displayed and experienced, reorganising the movements of the people living in a city (who otherwise would not interact or be in the same space) according to other mechanisms than those dictated by a consumer society. Art's space in a museum is also a place of segregation and exclusion (of the less educated or well off), but when art moves in the very spaces of the excluded, it primarily operates a redistribution of the visible, creating a platform for communal engagement with art (informed by diverse perspectives) and spaces of visibility where the silenced and the excluded can be heard and seen. In 2013, when Thomas Hirschhorn was commissioned by the Dia Art Foundation to create his last instalment of a series of 'monuments' (initiated in 1999) each celebrating a philosopher, the 8,000-square-foot outdoor sculpture built on the premises of Forest Houses, a New York City Housing Authority development in the Bronx (New York) became the stage of a multi-focal site-specific architectural sculpture and performance involving daily and weekly events orchestrated by the

artist but quickly absorbed by the community and explored as a space of interrogation of various forms of discrimination and marginalisation (be it intellectual, socio-economic, or political) through philosophical, artistic, theatrical, and literary tools. For the 77 days while the Gramsci Monument was on display, it morphed into a platform for the representation of the oppressed, negotiating pressing issues around the politics of identity (like presence, visibility, having a voice in the community) through education activities, theatre and art making as well as workshops aimed at deconstructing stereotypical associations with race, ethnicity, gender, culture or income class. The makeshift materials used in order to create this micro-city in a collage-like gesture of superposition and intersection of everyday spaces were meant to further highlight the impermanence and ephemeral nature of the project dubbed as a monument, once again, a contradiction at the very heart of the concept since its lifespan is meant to be short and its solidity is fragile, challenging traditional notions of permanence and stability and reflecting also on the need for an ongoing exploration of the fluidity and adaptability of the narratives of the self. By pasting together these temporary spaces built in the Forest Houses projects, the monument became an architectural and spatial collage that prompted a reexamination of the relation between the physicality of space and the more abstract and symbolic boundaries and partitions that operate in and inform the dynamics of spaces in a city. Hirschorn's Gramsci Monument created a communal space for people to actively engage with, test and explore social and cultural issues in relation to their identity. The idea of a temporary monument is of course an aporia meant to disrupt our view (or possessive gaze) of what art is or of how the organisation of a space orders and dictates the roles and places of individuals within a given venue. The impermanence of such an inclusive communal space escapes the systemic practices of consumption and *rituals of capture,* opening up the possibilities of art (and of an artwork) which can be experienced in inexhaustible ways but cannot be transacted.[13]

Collage. Layers of visibility

Artist Frida Orupabo's fragmented and collaged images invite viewers to critically engage with the complexities of sociopolitical issues and power structures by challenging us to confront our own preconceptions and biases as an external gaze internalised in relation to the limitations and stereotypes imposed by society. She often uses paper pins to hold the recontextualised images together, creating a sense of instability and tension, reflecting the complex and often contradictory nature of identity and experience and reclaiming the representation of marginalised communities. In this dialectic of concealment and disclosure of the narratives behind an image, tearing images apart reveals as much, if not more, than the additive gesture of collating them. The idea of collage plays on a liminal space that both defines, negotiates and disrupts the contours of representation in a shared space. Born in Norway in 1986, she began creating art as a way to explore her inter-racial identity and culture (Norwegian mother and

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[13] Ibid., xv.

Nigerian father) informed by her own experience of being a Black woman in a white country. In her series *I Have Seen a Million Pictures of My Face and Still I Have No Idea*, Orupabo collages together images of Black women sourced from colonial archives, cinema stills, fashion magazines, and social media. The resulting images are fragmented and disorienting, reflecting the fragmented and often contradictory ways in which Black women are represented in the media. In her series *Colonial Archive*, Orupabo weaves together images from colonial archives that are often violent and disturbing, but they also serve as a reminder of the legacy of colonialism and its impact on Black communities. Her collages challenge us to think critically about the ways in which race, gender, and other forms of identity are constructed and enacted, while exploring her origins and identity as well as the world around her in a kind of performance of the self which takes active ownership of her image in the representation of her community, instead of passively internalising the act of being documented by the white gaze. Joselit recounts for example how during the "European and American world expositions of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, so-called human zoos were frequently inserted amid exhibits of European industry and culture [...] Reconstructed villages or streets were displayed in Paris or Chicago and inhabited by residents of colonial territories who were brought to the Euro-American metropole to enact their daily lives before crowds of white spectators."[14] A human-scale collage of contrasting spaces and cultures that objectified the other while rendering them invisible and voiceless in displaying them as an exotic menagerie not unlike the curated storefronts of shopping malls or luxury brands of today.

Orupabo superposes and joins her fragmented images to articulate the question of belonging with the awareness that the culture she was born and grew up in shaped her understanding of her identity. Her complex relationship to Norway—where she felt she belonged, yet her belonging was questioned—triggered her interest to make work that spoke to her own reality and to collect images of people that looked like her. By putting together pieces of photography that actively and demonstratively cross the borders that pinpoint race and culture, she creates new realities against the objectification of the other, questioning what is a representation of a subject and who or what is a subject allowed to be when it is underrepresented. Do we really see the other who we define by difference beyond their racialized representations and what is their place in the city? The images that she collates each create a different narrative, so reframing them as she cuts them up and puts them back together again is predicated upon the need to manipulate reality, to challenge the dominant narratives and disrupt traditional notions of fixed identities in a deliberate emphasis on the fluidity and multiplicity of identity. There are images that resemble her (images of black women, family images or images from the colonial archives) and images that do not resemble her (images of white women, images from popular culture) and by cutting and intersecting these images, she changes their context and narrative: "While going through different archives you are reminded of the invisibility and the violence that has been inflicted on black bodies. It's like you want to rip everything away that you feel has made you invisible and sort of force

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[14] Ibid., 72.

yourself in and say 'I'm here, I've always been here, but now I am visible, now you can see me.'"[15] These images entered the colonial archives the same way works looted from western colonies entered western museums, as *cultural properties* not only through violent means—as David Joselit points out—, but also "in explicit efforts to annihilate the cultural sovereignty of colonised people through the destruction of their religions, customs, and aesthetic practices."[16] Orupabo's collages recall her complex relationship not only with her city, but with her own culture (disrupted by a simultaneous gesture of being both seized and appropriating) as they replicate a way of being in a space, occupying the same space as her fellow citizens and yet never fully blending in, never belonging 'naturally' because of the visible difference of her skin. Her identity is negotiated between two conflicting perspectives, each formulating its own narrative of her rightful belonging to a particular space or culture. Through her art, which explores the dissonance between these external perceptions, she seeks to reconcile her sense of belonging to the place of her origins with the unsettling realisation that this same place has questioned her belonging. Joselit maintains that "a crucial and paradoxical dimension of visual property" is introduced when images are no longer produced and controlled by (*in the possession of*) humans, but rather humans are captured and defined by (*in the possession of*) images. This is particularly evident in the context of colonialism, where people were often reduced to (*captured as*) stereotypical images that overdetermined their appearance and enslaved them to their representation. This dynamic epitomises the intricate interplay between our "desire to capture images," and the insidious manner in which images can capture and define us, how they "may be deployed to capture humans." As Joselit argues, stereotypes operate as oppressive "enslaving images," while simultaneously creating a "second self" that the individual must confront. This dispossession, he contends, functions as a negative possession, compelling individuals to *own* the stereotype in order to overcome it. Countering this capture and curation of images through the creation and deployment of alternative representations or counter-images (*fighting images with images*) can be seen as a way of reclaiming one's authentic identity and escaping the confines of the stereotype, which amounts to "an act of resistance to being enslaved by their images."[17]

Collage is a technique that exposes the seams of its constituting pieces allowing them to remain visible as they come together making up a whole new image and by doing that it draws attention to both individual fragmentation and the new narrative that brings/binds them together. Frida Orupabo's montage of images creates layers that are joined together in such a way as to create a sense of continuity and discontinuity or displacement at the same time, being seamlessly glued but visibly pinned together with staples to further emphasise the stitching. Her collages of images of (mostly) women that stare back at the viewer not only draw on her own feelings of frustration and anger, hostility or vulnerability to be stared at, but also

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[15] Christian Lund, "I Was Hungry for Images That Would Resemble Me. Artist Frida Orupabo," Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, 2022: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xVVX8UU7apc (accessed on 7 March 2024).

[16] Joselit, *Art's Properties*, 15.

[17] Ibid., 73-75.

emphasise the importance of the gaze in confronting the viewer with what the artist believes the other is thinking. In this continuous exchange of gazes Orupabo challenges the ostensible neutral position against which the (different) other is cast in a fixed position predetermined by culture, or colour. In her words, she seeks to create an encounter with the people "who do not have a position, who are neutral but for whom you have a position, you have a skin colour, you have a culture" with the hope that they will enter this dialogue that is eliciting different feelings from the viewer. "I want people to dive into themselves and to recognise their own position. That is the essence of my work."[18] Orupabo's artwork subverts the conventional art historical emphasis on individual artists and artworks, aligning with David Joselit's assertion that images are not passive reflections but active agents that shape our perception and understanding of reality. Joselit argues that we should shift our attention away from individual artists and their creations and focus instead on the dynamic movement and exchange of images themselves, since by examining how images circulate and transform across diverse cultural and political landscapes, we gain a deeper comprehension of the forces that shape our identities and our interactions with the world around us.[19]

Identity. Re-drawing territories

Borrowing techniques from film, theatre, photography, performance or painting, Pakistani-born artist Nalini Malani explores, along similar lines, site-specific art histories in connection to politically charged subjects and legacies of past ownership. She confronts the monolithic histories of western art tradition while critically engaging with the realities of the 21st century using 'visual storytelling' in order to reenact and reconnect with the humanity of the narratives she revisits from an *alternative* perspective, combating histories of oppression of the silenced and marginalised figures of history through the (humanising) effects of storytelling. While revisiting paintings of the western art canon and confronting them with the different perspectives these revisitations open up, Nalini Malani rewrites histories of patriarchal dominance from different, often opposing global contexts by emphasising suppressed voices and undermining gender stereotyping. Her aim is to help make the subaltern speak by "making a *new* art in dialogue with the art of the past."[20] As she digitally overlays hand drawn animations over selected sections of old master paintings in a storytelling gesture that enacts a constantly shifting digital collage, Malani employs a mixed media approach that undercuts conventional divisions between disciplines while enmeshing visual and textual sources that combine philosophy, literature, video, photography, drama, and shadowplay to create immersive experiences that replicate the experience of immersive theatre in order to take the viewer through different narratives spotlighting historically marginalised voices and to thus allow for different realities, histories and identities to emerge. Her site-specific installations

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[18] Lund, interview.

[19] David Joselit, *After Art* (New Jersey; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013).

[20] Nalini Malani, *My Reality Is Different* (London: National Gallery Global, 2022).

often feature projections of her digital drawings superimposed onto other images projected on large-scale screens, employing powerful imagery as she explores themes of oppression and resistance, particularly as they intersect with identity and the (forgotten) traumatic legacy of colonial domination. In 2014, following a commission by the Edinburgh Arts Festival and the '14-18 Now' programme commemorating the centenary of the First World War, Malani created *In Search of Vanished Blood*, a site-specific installation that projected onto the facade of the Scottish National Gallery building archive footage (from the Imperial War Museum) of military training exercises which juxtaposed, on the adjoining side of the building, with footage showing women handling ammunition in war factories, against a soundtrack in Cassandra's voice forewarning against the consequence of a potential Third World War. Cassandra, the Greek mythology tragic figure endowed with the gift of prophecy but cursed to never be believed, is a recurring presence in her installations. Her story serves as a backdrop and an allegory for the struggle for visibility and the ways in which power structures determine what is visible and what is invisible within society and operationalise the marginalisation of people by denying them the right to be seen and heard. Malani's 2023 installation, *My Reality is Different* (commissioned by the National Gallery, London, and the Holburne Museum, Bath) reiterates Cassandra's story (adapting Christa Wolf's 1983 eponymous novel) in an (institutionally assumed) reflection on how historically marginalised voices can be heard. Cassandra's lamenting narrative (voiced by Malani's longtime collaborator—actor and director—Alaknanda Samarth) accompanies, in a repetitive loop of the same recurring monologue, nine channels of overlapping videos projected at random in a room-sized installation—in what Malani calls an *animation chamber*—while the unsynchronised pace of each channel enable endless juxtapositions to occur without repetition "in a radical textual practice of difference" because "the only way to prevent the reduction of complex realities into compartmentalised, fixed readings and circumvent recurring cycles of ever more refined marginalisation is to use methods and visions of difference, differently."[21] The narrative of the burnt city, another recurring trope in Malani's works, symbolises the uprooting and erasure of history, heritage, and identity, leaving the marginalised without a place in the city or a sense of belonging: "I wanted to steer the visitor to take an active part and be engulfed, to shake things up as in a theatrical experience such as Antonin Artaud's *Theatre of Cruelty.*"[22] Malani's immersive and repetitive use of cross-cultural images emphasises the persistence of collective trauma and the ongoing struggle for recognition and reclaiming one's heritage in a 'link language' capable of making an *art of resistance* that goes beyond borders. Her artwork ultimately challenges the complicity of the viewer's gaze already contained in both contemporary and traditional art canon representations by enacting and making visible her own deliberate gestures of image manipulation in order to "emphasise that women do experience public space differently. After all, museums did become a public space when they were established out of private collections.

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[21] Ranjana Thapalyal, "Nalini Malani: My Reality is Different," *Art Monthly*, No. 466 (May 2023): 28-29.
[22] Malani, *My Reality Is Different*, 46.

Despite the gender awareness introduced by modernity, women were still excluded from public spaces, as the gender imbalance of these museum collections likewise clearly shows."[23]

Memory. Performing identities

Johannesburg-based visual artist and photographer Lebohang Kganye incorporates photography, theatre, performance, and sculpture in her artmaking as she explores the mechanisms that determine what is seen and remembered. As she is trying to retrace her family history, she probes into the idea of identity as an experimental 'space of extreme contradictions' blending 'truth and fiction' in a "malleable entity with the pretence of fixedness"[24] and explores the intersections of personal and collective histories. In *Heir-story* (Ke Lefa Laka, 2013), her collaged compositions articulate life size cut out photographed figures and objects in black and white (blown up from old family photographs) with her own physical presence in a ghostly performative setting to the effect that the collaged one-dimensional images of the past and three-dimensional space of the present haunt each other anachronically reflecting on the re-enactment and (re)construction of memories through photography. The narratives retrieved by her family photographic albums intermesh with the political and economic history of South Africa in an image-based performance of an unreliable memory enacted and exposed as a social and cultural construct. She employs photomontage to create a "substitute for the paucity of memory, a forged identification and imagined conversation"[25] with collective and multiple memories, but also with gaps in memory, an exploration which she continued in *Pied Piper's Voyage* (2014), where she created a video montage of her mother's family history in South Africa during apartheid, as they were displaced from their rural home in the farmlands and forced (by the land and redistribution acts which denied them access to the land they had owned or worked for generations yet had no legal claim to) to move to the city in search of work. The apartheid laws in place segregated these families and forced them to move away from city centres to townships designated for them and then to travel from place to place in search of work to feed their families. In a theatrical scenery populated by internet-sourced architecture elements and old family photo portraits, she appears, across six life-size installations, wearing her grandfather's oversized suit, hat, and shoes (him being the first member of the family to move to the city), recreating scenes based on oral stories told by family members and re-engaging with the journey of her family and the 'constructed life' operated by the selection of photographs curated and passed

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[23] Ibid.

[24] Lebohang Kganye, "L. Kganye: Photo Albums and the Relationship with Oral Histories as a Means of Interpreting Our Past," *Tate Modern*, 2024: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VDnyZFmXiNc (accessed on 7 March 2024).

[25] Gabriela Sá and Chloe Davies, "Lebohang Kganye Interview," *Archivo. Photography and Visual Culture Research Platform*, 2020: https://www.archivoplatform.com/Post/Interview-Lkganye (accessed on 7 March 2024).

down from one generation to another. By recreating moments that she never experienced she draws on the gaps in memory as well as its non-chronological nature and muses on the fabricated nature of history. Her collages explore a fractured identity (reflected also in the several alterations her last name underwent across generations because of misspelt entries in official documents) that can only be pieced together precariously while no unity can be conferred. Her *In Search for Memory* (2020) photo installation employs architectural narratives built on photography and collage that delve into both personal and collective memories of displaced black communities which are presented in their domestic environments in relation to everyday ordinary gestures and objects. While recalling stories and experiences that have been overlooked or forgotten, the sculpted papers and photograph cardboard cutouts turn members of her family into anonymous faceless black silhouettes pasted ghostly against the white backgrounds of a (both domestic and exterior) space that is lacking any sense of dimension, direction or perspective. The artist's realisation that there is no (sense of) identity to be retrieved, no common memory or seamless lineage to the past prompts her to explore these issues from a place that has no claim to any overarching narrative. Her enacted scenes create a space of visibility that allows personal but also common narratives to emerge. The alterity that is revealed in this process is neither captured, nor curated, but speaks obliquely to unsettled histories that reprise and reshape themselves in the theatre of a conspicuously absent memory.

David Joselit's critique of modernity (with an emphasis on conceptual art) goes on to show how the ideology of possessive individualism coagulating around the idea of authorship (as a trademark that identifies the modern artist with a unique style and personal branding identity) is an imperial residue that causes modern art to lose its critical and transformative potential. In assigning value to art only to treat it as a commodity whose worth (or artistic value) is decided by the art market and museums, these agents of *cultural and symbolic capital* maintain a system of private ownership that not only ignores the social, cultural and political potential of art, but perpetuates the gesture of capturing and curating (and by that controlling and domesticating) the difference. The examples above suggest alternatives to these imperial residues or at least attempt to reframe and redefine some of the key political, social and aesthetic reference points of our time. The artistic endeavours of Hirschhorn, Orupabo, Malani, and Kganye reveal critical and urgent possibilities of understanding the contemporary, the cartographies of the commons and the opportunity of a common memory that today seems more imperative than ever.