Length, Width, Height

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Abstract

The body of work included in *Length, Width, Height* reflects society’s constriction of bodies of color, specifically those marked as Other. In this text, I discuss these works in the contexts of rigid social structures, the socialization of Western children, and the persistence of Orientalism. These works take the form of interactive installations, video performances, and takeaway objects. Using recognizable structures and objects that, through visual cues, lure audience participation, I allude to the human disposition for securing space at the expense of bodies of color. In this body of work, I interrogate the adverse effects of casual microaggressions, profiling, patronizing behavior, and frequent assertions of power on these bodies. I discuss “disidentification” as a method for infiltrating from the inside in order to have relevance with a Western audience. In *Length, Width, Height*, I examine my work in relation to art theory by Claire Bishop, José Esteban Muñoz, and Katarzyna Zimna as well as cultural criticism by Edward W. Said. I also draw comparisons between my work and works by Vito Acconci, Janine Antoni, Tehching Hsieh, Rashid Johnson, Emma Sulkowitz, and Félix González-Torres. I arrive at the impossibility of a utopic alternative to our current social structures and instead focus on the need to infiltrate as a means of disrupting the longevity of Western dominance.
Introduction

Individuals often take the shape of their container. Rarely do individuals question the dimensions of their containers, yet it is plain that they vary greatly amongst Americans. What is the recipe for how much space a person is allotted at birth? The mixture begins with the colors of one’s biological parents’ skin, blended to form either an unchanged tone or a new composite color. Cultural heritage is the second ingredient, followed by wealth or lack of wealth. Geographic location rounds out the mixture and the basic dimensions are set. But the recipe continues to change over time as one’s identity begins to form and other social factors enter the mix. The recipe for space is further complicated by the fact that space fluctuates over time and across different situations for a single individual. The length, width, and height of our containers are ever-changing, yet we understand their maximum or minimum volumes may never come close to the ranges of others. In response, we struggle to maximize the dimensions of our containers, understanding that bigger is better. What we struggle against is the legacy of colonization and the social inequalities it has imparted on us.

Through installation and video performance, I question society’s compliance and/or passivity towards the amount of space predetermined for individuals considered to be “Other.” I specifically explore the Western constructs that contain and stifle Eastern bodies. Through what can be described as constructed “situations,” my work interrogates the confined spaces Eastern bodies are made to develop in. These spaces are noticeably smaller, tighter, and more rigid than the spaces allotted to those with White privilege. The few archetypes offered to Eastern bodies

* Eastern bodies = individuals with Eastern heritage (often viewed as the “Other”). This term does not assume nationality or any other aspects of identity.
lack dimension, nuance, and diversity. In my work, I seek to understand these space limits and their adverse effects on the formation of identities, including my own. Through my own specific lens, I channel my frustrations with microaggressions, profiling, patronizing behavior, and frequent assertions of power into interactive works. Through interaction, my work asks viewers to reflect on their role in the repression of “Other” bodies. My work can be broken down into several different threads. I will discuss my work in the following contexts:

i. The Role of Culturally-Rich Materials

ii. Presence Through Material

iii. Consumption and Commodity

iv. Play and Interaction

v. Self-imposed Situations

vi. Exhaustion of the Body

vii. The Paradox of the Vacuum

The Role of Culturally-Rich Materials

My work begins with materials of cultural significance to visually represent the East-West dichotomy. Large quantities of jasmine rice, inauthentic Persian rugs, meditation balls, and other “imported” goods permeate my work. Though these goods date back to old trade routes, they maintain relevance as icons of exoticism. The West has a tendency to lump Eastern cultures into a single mono-culture. By mixing goods from different Eastern cultures that are incongruent when placed together, I mirror the West’s carelessness towards giving distinction to these different cultures. I create a caricature of the East using irony that is easily lost on extreme
perpetrators of Orientalism. While the term has become dated, “oriental” has stubbornly remained in the English vocabulary as a way to describe everything east of Europe. My work attempts to convey the harm of collapsing all Eastern cultures into a single, convenient adjective.

In *Orientalism*, a book first published nearly forty years ago, Edward Said deconstructs the history of the so-called Orient. While he speaks mainly of the Orient in terms of the Middle East, his critique at times references the shared issues that exist between the Middle East and the Far East (East Asia and Southeast Asia). Said describes the Orient as Europe’s “cultural contest, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other” (Said 1). This tension manifests itself in the East-West dichotomy that exists to this day. The West defines and maintains its own image of the East as the Other, rather than allowing the East to define itself. Said goes on to assert that “the imaginative examination of things Oriental was based more or less exclusively upon a sovereign Western consciousness” (8). It is this sovereign Western consciousness which I attempt to interrogate and dismantle by using materials that nod to these narrow and antiquated perceptions of the East.

In my multi-media installation *Essential* (2016), I criticize the essentialization of Eastern bodies (Fig. 1 & 2). In the center of a room, a cheap and inauthentic Persian rug lies flat on the
floor and is surrounded by sixty pounds of jasmine rice. The rice acts as a stand-in for my body at age six, a period of critical development and mental elasticity. A single broom hangs from a mount on the far wall. On another wall is a projection of a video performance, a looping thirteen-minute video in which viewers can see an overhead view of myself interacting with the installation. In the performance, I attempt to sweep and hide the rice in its entirety underneath the rug. The video ends when I have, to the best of my ability, hidden any evidence of the rice’s presence in the room. In seconds, the video loops to the beginning and the performance begins again. The broom on the far wall invites a participant to do the same to my child “body.” The installation component of the performance challenges others to violate Eastern bodies by lumping them into a single entity beneath a so-called Oriental rug.

**Presence Through Material**

Rashid Johnson makes reference to the black body through his use of material. Johnson, who grew up in an Afro-centric household in Chicago, often employs large quantities of shea butter (Fig. 3), a moisturizing fat derived from the African shea tree, in his work as well as African black soap. In an interview with Lilly Wei for *Studio International*, he described his infatuation with these materials after a trip to Ghana when he was eighteen. When his mother and step-father began to adapt to a working-class professional lifestyle, Johnson grappled with the sudden absence of Afrocentrism in his home. These materials “became the catalyst to investigate—seriously and with humour—an African identity within an American culture...the conversation begins with shea butter’s nurturing and healing properties” (Wei). Shea butter evokes the black body as it is a substance applied topically to the skin and hair. His usage of shea butter, which he
carves into, rolls, and stacks in heaps, becomes a metaphor for the Western treatment of black bodies.

Dry rice alludes to the Eastern body through its association with daily consumption. It enters and becomes part of the body similarly to shea butter, except through ingestion rather than direct application. In my work I use vast quantities of jasmine rice to stand in for my specific body. By measuring out dry rice to equal my own body weight at different periods in my life, I reference my own history with enduring restrictive Western constructs. While *Essential* references my body during childhood, I refer to my present self in *Portrait of the Artist* (2017) by measuring out dry rice to my current weight. In this interactive piece, I present spectators with three tools that can be pulled down from the wall and used to comb into, draw into, and erase marks from a raised bed (*Fig. 4 & 5*). The Zen garden-like bed houses my metaphorical body. At the base of the shallow bed is a mirror that is occasionally, to one’s surprise, uncovered when the bed is drawn into. In the occasional glimpses of images offered by the mirror, participants can see the surrounding room and the reflections of the other participants. Through this
meditative and mindless act, the participants define the form of the rice. The mirror, however, increases their awareness of their role in pushing, pulling, combing, and erasing the form of a substance that represents an Eastern body, in this case the body of the artist.

I choose to use jasmine rice as a stand-in for my Eastern body in order to make the work more palatable for a Western audience. In other words, by leaving the specificity of my image out of the work, the viewer can approach the work with less hesitation. In this way, the work is less confrontational and able to implicate in a subtler way. This use of minimal and non-representational forms by POC*/queer POC artists is a strategy that the author José Esteban Muñoz defines as “disidentification” in his book Disidentifications. In reference to the way Félix González-Torres approached his work, Muñoz wrote that the artist “never invoked identity elements in any obvious way. He depended on a minimalist symbolic lexicon... González-Torres’s minimalism evoked meaning and employed connotation, using the minimalist style to speak to a larger social order” (165). Therefore, the success of González-Torres’ work stemmed partially from infiltrating from the “inside” in order to gain more eyes and more ears. In an interview with Robert Storr, he spoke about defying expectations of what the work of a Cuban-American gay

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*POC = People of color
artist should look like. In the interview, he said to “[first] infiltrate and then once you are inside, try to have an effect. I want to be a spy, too... Every time they see a clock or a stack of paper or a curtain, I want them to think twice” (Ault 238). In my own work, I similarly want to “trick” participants into recognizing the greater implications of their participation. By first luring in my audience with a visual clue, such as a broom or rake, I implicitly ask them to consider their readiness or hesitance to pick them up. I then implicitly ask them to consider the significance of the material before them, in this case large quantities of rice. In this way, my criticism is perceived as more gentle than antagonizing.

**Consumption and Commodity**

Domestic spaces are often indicators of the individuals who reside there. Through our careful—or unconcerned—curation of our spaces and consumption of goods, a variety of factors become apparent about us. Strictly through association, one can often infer an individual’s socioeconomic status, nationality, race, and cultural identity and subsequently infer the amount of privilege that results from this mish mash. In my work, I use specific domestic items to indicate the type of consumption that is the subject of my critique. The ready consumption of “exotic” and “imported” goods serves as an example of the narrow lens through which Eastern cultures, and subsequently Eastern bodies, are viewed. The West understands this image as the standard archetype of the Eastern individual. It erases the diversity, richness, and validity of cultures and identities that are, simply, nothing more than “Other” or in polar opposition to the standards of the West. In a similar fashion to *Essential*, I critique this essentializing image of the “Orient” in my work *Safety in Numbers* (2017) *(Fig. 6).*
A standard, wooden playpen that could exist in the typical American home is lined with a Persian rug. Several wooden “balls” are scattered inside the pen. The balls, however, can be interpreted as either toys or as smooth meditation balls. Images of what is considered Other is cultivated at a young age, and this work is staged to mimic this image. As I mentioned previously, the mental elasticity of children during development is a crucial period for learning or dispelling these social constructs. Children, both Eastern and Western, begin to shift into their assigned roles at this stage without question. The result of reinforcing this imagery is the continuation of a false perception of Eastern cultures and bodies.

This work again uses a Persian rug, often referred to as an “Oriental” rug. It is important to note not only the cultural-specificity of this item (one that is incongruent with my ethnicity) but also the amount that this iconic “import” has been watered down, cheapened, and commodified. This particular rug is entirely inauthentic—it is a modern reproduction of a Persian icon that was produced cheaply in Turkey, rather than woven in Iran. Although this rug has become a little dated, it has continued to have a place in homes in the 21st century. Its presence
as an everyday object unconsciously feeds Western perceptions of the “exotic” East and the Other.

**Play and Interaction**

The invitation to “play” in my work serves as an unassuming entry point for a Western audience to approach the work. It also acts as a metaphor for socialization and its lasting impacts. On its surface, play is delightful and a surprising departure from the untouchability that is expected of work that exists in a gallery. In *Time to Play: Action and Interaction in Contemporary Art*, Katarzyna Zimna deconstructs the notion of play. According to Zimna, play is unlike anything else for it is “superfluous and relegated to spare time. It must never be regarded as a task—it is neither physical necessity, nor moral duty.” (Zimna 12) Play is especially alluring in an art context for viewers because it is a departure from the seriousness of work. The invitation to perform mindless activities, such as drawing into a Zen garden with a rake, scooping a portion of rice into a treat bag to take home, or selecting a piece of hard candy from a pile seems harmless and even something to enjoy. Through these simple and delightful acts, participants have the option to consider the implications of how they change and affect the work physically and metaphorically. For me, this tension between participation and implication is an opportunity to make participants more conscientious of their role in persistence of the East-West dichotomy.

When play is considered in its original context, the context of childhood, it is understood as a learning tool. During playtime, “children follow their instinct to rehearse adult activities, so play must be seen as ‘training’, a ‘pre-exercise’ for life.” (Zimna 7) In other words, children learn and practice the roles in society that are preassigned to them based on gender, race, status, etc.
Safety in Numbers references this phenomenon the most directly and questions the problematic assumptions that spawn from limited exposure to and ignorance of Eastern cultures and experiences. In Claire Bishop’s Artificial Hells, she describes the process of unlearning these roles through participatory art as a process of “[re-evaluating] everyday objects and experiences as a point of opposition to cultural hierarchy” (Bishop 75). In this way, the subversion of iconic imported goods through understanding them in a different context—like through play—is a method of bringing the unconscious stifling of Eastern bodies forward into the conscious.

Through a Freudian lens, play is for the purpose of catharsis. Zimna states that Freud would assert that “repetitive play helps children master a situation and learn how to deal with stress in a safe context. Children in play create their own versions of past events and scenarios for the future, to satisfy their emotional needs” (Zimna 8). When considering this in the context of Essential where I myself perform the hiding and essentializing of my metaphorical body, I am also in the role of the player just as much as the viewer can be. In this work, I attempt to regain control of my past and my current situation and the performance is in this way cathartic for myself. The invitation—my invitation—for the viewer to reenact the performance is yet another layer in which the viewer and myself fluctuate between being in control of and submitting to the other.

Self-imposed Situations

Performative art is often characterized by artists setting parameters for themselves and enduring self-imposed tasks that are physically, mentally, and/or emotionally taxing. At times this begs the question, “how can the artist effectively make a statement if they are playing into
the very role they are critiquing?” This same question can be directed at my work. Why am I sweeping myself under the rug? Or providing tools that can be used to push my body around? There is undoubtedly a certain irony to these actions as I submit my “body” to them and invite bystanders to do the same.

When the situation is authored by the artist, a power imbalance immediately arises. Janine Antoni’s performance Loving Care (1993) placed her on all fours on the floor of the gallery, vulnerable to the watchful eyes of those in attendance (Fig. 7). She dipped her hair into a bucket of black dye and proceeded to mop the floor of the gallery, pushing the spectators back as the floor became saturated with dye. The act of mopping has obvious domestic overtones; Antoni’s gender identity complicates the performance, as she is a woman performing a somewhat demeaning act while crouched in a compromising position. There is a duality, however, in this performance. As Antoni mopped, she rendered the floor untouchable to others. The audience was pushed back as they avoided the splash of the dye, the wetted floor, and the moving body before them. In a sense then, Antoni possessed the power in the situation as she claimed the floor as her territory and transformed the act of mopping into a method for reclaiming space.
In my work *Foundation* (2017), I constructed a large wooden platform in the corner of a room (Fig. 8, 9, & 10). From it, one can hear audible breathing and movement inside the form. Upon climbing the steps on either side, two unmistakable peepholes in the far corner become visible. Kneeling or sitting to peer inside, the unsuspecting viewer is surprised by a video embedded beneath the peepholes. My face peers up at them in an unfocused daze. As I shift around to make myself comfortable in my imprisonment, I bump the floorboards and sigh deeply, producing the unsettling sounds that emit from a hidden speaker. In this work, I cast myself as a victim of containment. The power imbalance that arises, however, is muddied by my authorship of the work.
With loose inspiration from Vito Acconci’s infamous performance *Seedbed* (1972) (Fig. 11), I have put myself in a demeaning position beneath my audience. I am, however, also producing the discomfort and unease of viewers above and the power imbalance fluctuates between myself and them. In this work, the dissonance that arises is a necessary discomfort in order to recognize the questions of power that I pose. Here, I ask my audience to reflect on the structures that bind POCs and put their issues out of sight.
Exhaustion of the Body

The exhaustion felt by someone who is victimized by society is characterized well in Emma Sulkowitz’s performance titled *Self-Portrait (Performance with Object)* (2016) (*Fig. 12*).

This performance took place after the artist gained national attention for her performance *Carry That Weight* (2014-2015) otherwise known as *Mattress Performance*. Tired of being defined by her sexual assault, this piece was her way of passing questions that are often asked of her onto an object. In this performance, Emma stood beside a life-size replica of herself, named Emmatron, on opposite pedestals. On facing pedestals, visitors were invited to ask her or Emmatron questions. If Emma was asked a question she had grown tired of regarding her assault, she directed them to Emmatron who came with prerecorded answers on an iPad (Mizota).
In my recent work 2:1 (2017) (Fig. 13 & 14) I express my exhaustion with fielding questions regarding the authenticity of my identity and my origins. Rice, measured out to my current body weight again, is split between two feeding troughs. On either side of the troughs are waxed treat bags that are editioned 1-100. The aluminum scoops inside the troughs invite viewers to scoop a portion of the rice into a bag and take it home with them. The fate of this fraction of my metaphorical body is then at their disposal. The work ends when the rice has entirely depleted and my “body” as a resource has been exhausted. Stemming from my own tiredness of being the subject of microaggressions, profiling, patronizing behavior, and frequent assertions of power, this piece interrogates the imbalanced relationship between the giver (myself) and the taker. It questions when this relationship shifts between being mutual and parasitic.
Félix González-Torres at times dealt with exhaustion and loss by creating his *Untitled* candy piles as stand-ins for individuals that were close to him. In *Untitled (Portrait of Dad)* (1991), his deceased father is represented by hard candies individually wrapped in white cellophane (Fig. 15). He set the weight of the stack at, ideally, 175 pounds. The candy is replenished nightly and the original weight is recovered. Like his other candy pieces, visitors found delight in taking a piece from the pile and enjoying their small take-away prize. Upon considering their role, however, in participating in the consumption of a representation of a
deceased individual, enjoyment is replaced with contemplation. González-Torres’ titling and material strategies makes it more apparent that this is not simply a piece of free candy but rather a method for disseminating and maintaining the memory of his loved ones. It is a way to pass off his own exhaustion and sadness onto others to unknowingly carry. The sadness is spread and transformed into a sweet candy in the mouth.

The Paradox of the Vacuum

Is there an escape from the stifling structures that suppress and exhaust Eastern bodies? Does there exist a space or even a temporary space that operates as a “vacuum,” devoid of culture and assumptions? With The Rumination Room (2016), I set out to fabricate a space that could claim to be the closest thing to a true vacuum (Fig. 16). Inside of the room are sparse provisions; placed inside are a small bed, a desk, a stool, and a glass decanter of water. Before entering the room, the viewer is stopped by a table that holds copies of a manifesto in the form of a small business card:

The Rumination Room is a 640 ft³ vacuum. There is no outside influence. There is no distraction. The room provides a place to lie, a place to sit, and room to pace. Water is provided.

Time does not exist in the Rumination Room. There is no limit to how long you may stay, and you may remain for as long as you’d like. Only one individual may occupy the room at a time. You may bring nothing inside the room.
As stated in the manifesto, the space exists for the purpose of escaping unwanted outside influence. It is, however, a temporary escape from society. In the search for freedom from an oppressive container, one must paradoxically enter another. The design of the objects within the space are not without Western influence and the space does nothing to dispel self-consciousness. Although the manifesto illustrates the room as a space of isolation, the wall-less construction of the room and the inability to prevent others from watching or communicating with the participant who enters does not allow the participant to fully operate within the space’s intentions. In these ways, the room fails to serve its true purpose and the quest for freedom remains in limbo.
Tehching Hsieh’s goals in his *One Year Performance* (1978-1979), often referred to as *Cage Piece*, were more extreme (Fig. 17). In this test of endurance, Hsieh was locked in a cage composed of pine dowels in the corner of his studio by his lawyer on September 30, 1978. Like *The Rumination Room*, this cage was outfitted with only necessary provisions including a bed, a single light, a sink, and a pail for human waste. Every day, a friend brought food and clean clothes for Hsieh and emptied his waste bucket. Hsieh attempted to free his mind by shutting out the outside world and disallowing any access to a radio, television, or the news. The parameters he set for his year in the cage included not speaking, writing, or reading while inside. Every three weeks, his studio was opened to the public and his isolation was interrupted. The individuals who wandered in were met with an uncomfortable spectacle—Hsieh was not allowed to interact or make eye contact with them. On September 29, 1979, the cage was opened again by his lawyer and Hsieh left his imprisonment.

In an interview with his biographer, Adrian Heathfield, the artist described the necessity of the cage to achieve the freedom of thought that he sought. “My mind” he said, “detached
from the confinement, was free to think and to advance. I am as free in the cage as outside.” (Heathfield 328). But just as The Rumination Room fails to completely remove outside influence, Hsieh’s parameters failed to completely shut out influence as well. Although he did not interact with the public, his friend, or his lawyer during their visits, their presence undoubtedly broke his isolation. And although he sought the freedom to think, he entered the cage with his memory intact. “The motivation of this piece had something to do with the content of my thinking” he said. “I thought of people who influence me and about my understanding and experiences of rebellion, betrayal, crime, punishment, suffering and freedom. This kind of thinking game me energy to go forward one day, and I would do it all over again the next day, and day after day, go on doing it for one year.” (Heathfield 328) Advancing his thinking required building off of what existed beforehand. Therefore, he is right to claim himself as being just as free inside the cage as outside the cage. Although we may wish to escape society, it exists equally in our minds as much as it does in the physical realm. Influence is unescapable and freedom is strictly utopic.

Conclusion

Is there a solution to dismantling the East-West dichotomy? What affect can my work have on the deeply entrenched history of Eastern bodies being forced into Western constructs? The problematic treatment of Eastern bodies has resisted the test of time. Like other POCs, the issues that affect Eastern bodies are often considered to be niche issues and are subsequently dismissed or forgotten. Therefore, in my work, I attempt to infiltrate from the inside through disidentification and through the appeal of play. I bring to light how the ownership of objects and the dissemination of false ideas and assumptions preserve this dichotomy. My goal then is to
facilitate an understanding of why these issues possess such permanence and longevity. I attempt to inundate my audience with references to the mistreatment of Eastern bodies. Through examining this power imbalance, I ask viewers to reconsider their placement on the ladder and to resist and dismantle this imbalance from the inside.
Works Cited


