December 2023

Performance Art as a Site of Socio-spatial Resistance: Challenging Geographies of Gendered Violence

Egle Karpaviciute
University College Dublin, Ireland

Follow this and additional works at: https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws

Part of the Women's Studies Commons

Recommended Citation

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts. This journal and its contents may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Authors share joint copyright with the JIWS. ©2022 Journal of International Women's Studies.
Performance Art as a Site of Socio-spatial Resistance: Challenging Geographies of Gendered Violence

By Egle Karpaviciute

Abstract

By researching the intersections of art, geography, and violence, this paper interrogates performance art and its capacity to question one’s gendered existence in space/place. Through an analysis of two performance art pieces—J. Hawkes’s Playing Kate (2018) and Cassils’s PISSED (2017)—I explore the connections between art, gendered bodies, and space/place, while establishing a link between and across feminist and trans* gendered tyrannies. While discussing feminist and trans* performance art, this paper probes the felt and lived harms that are experienced by feminist women and trans* individuals in gendered locales and addresses ways in which art can challenge socio-spatial violence. Overall, through a broad exploration of geographies of art and violence, this paper speaks of spatial gendered oppression as well as spatialized potential and hope.

Keywords: Feminist and trans* geographies, Feminist performance art, Trans* performance art, Gendered violence, Gender tyranny

Introduction

Drawing from feminist and trans* performance art, this paper seeks to probe the potential that artistic language holds in critiquing, challenging, and transforming gendered harm in public spaces. Whilst focusing on women’s and trans* people’s gendered experiences and everyday existence in space/place, a lens of commonality rather than division is applied, offering an exploration of space/place as a site of gender tyranny for both feminist women and trans* individuals. By focusing on performance art specifically, this paper interrogates how art may help question and challenge spatialized violence, faced by female and transgender bodies, as sites of embodied existence and felt oppression.

This paper is split into three parts. Part one lays out the framework for addressing the intersections between gendered bodies, space/place, and violence. Part two focuses on the

---

1 Egle Karpaviciute earned an MA in Gender Studies at University College Dublin (UCD), School of Social Policy, Social Work and Social Justice. She is a former Teaching Assistant in Gender Studies at UCD, presently working as a Policy & Communications Officer in an Irish frontline NGO that assists survivors of sexual exploitation and human trafficking. As a recipient of the prestigious Ursula Barry Scholarship in Gender Studies and a First Class Honours MA degree, Egle holds an interest in the intersection between gender, sexualities, and religion; post-Soviet gendered frictions; masculinities; and the anti-gender movement. Her auto-ethnographic dissertation From Holy to Whole: Losing My Religion detangled tensions that emerge at the nexus of Catholicism and women’s bodies as gendered, sexed, and affective entities and focused on a lived and embodied experience of Catholic shame. Overall, Egle’s feminist research is informed by affect theory, the feminist politics of emotion, and a Foucauldian lens.

2 Epistemologically rooted in a trans-positive feminist standpoint, this body of work most commonly utilizes an expansive label “trans*” whilst talking about transgender, gender-fluid, and gender-nonconforming individuals. Employing this term, this paper addresses people’s identities without getting into “fine-grain distinctions” (Stryker, 2018, cited in Steinmetz, 2018, para. 7), though remaining inclusive. Additionally, terms transgender and trans are employed throughout this piece, sometimes interchangeably. See Stephens & Sellberg, 2019.

3 Acknowledging that trans* people, especially in recent years, have been experiencing distinctive socio-spatial oppression, this paper is not seeking to paint gendered violence against and towards women and trans* individuals as equivalent. Rather, this body of work looks for points of commonality—not sameness—across varied types of gendered oppression.
exceptionality of feminist and trans* art, whilst unpacking the chosen research direction: the intersection of performance art and gendered tyranny. Part three utilizes the above mentioned notion of gender tyranny whilst exploring performance art and highlights how the correlation of feminist geography and art offers an expansive and affective perception of gendered harm and oppression.

Analyzing Hawkes’s *Playing Kate* (2018) and Cassils’s *PISSED* (2017), I outline linkages between gendered bodies, space/place, and gender tyranny. Exposing how these artworks challenge heteronormative and patriarchal shapes and shades of spatial embodiment and relationality, art as such is highlighted as a platform where a flourishment of affective resistance may take place. Ultimately, while displaying gendered oppression, feminist and trans* art is showcased as a way of “doing” individual-centered storytelling and producing socio-spatial transformation.

**Gendered Bodies, Gendered Sites: The Body and Space/Place**

As gendered and sexed subjects, bodies are rooted in locales, as they take up space in and define themselves within spaces and places (McDowell, 1999). Flexible and fluid, individual bodies are constructed through public discourses, knowledge(s), and practices of everyday-ness, as well as spatial scales and divisions (McDowell, 1999; Thrift, 2009). Geographies of the body are defined as relational, processual, and dynamic (McDowell, 1999; Johnston and Longhurst, 2010; Quilty, 2020). Bodies therefore hold a twofold relationality: 1) a connection to space/place through its physicality, existing as a continuous, dynamic situatedness “somewhere, elsewhere, potentially in, out, between, and beyond place” (Quilty, 2020, p. 53), and 2) a relationship with other bodies through sexuality, which orientates a body “towards and away from others,” constituting varied “social spaces” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 145). Consequently, bodily relationality constitutes a “spatial dance” of “dividual” bodies in a spatial and affective flux (Thrift, 2009, p. 103). These situated performances of everyday sense-making are where affect appears, as bodily meanings and intensities that pierce social interpretations (Hemmings, 2005) and appear through shifts in power (Deleuze, 1997, as cited in Hemmings, 2005). Places and spaces are crucial in producing affect (Thrift, 2009), since space-place is where relations and connections become embodied, directed, or disrupted. Therefore, places, as affective spaces, hold the capacity to bring individuals to life and affect change, as well as to do the opposite (Thrift, 2009). Spaces/places can both produce clusters of “affective resistance” (Fontaine, 2021, p. 639), as well as contain avenues of “affective atmospheres of unwelcome” (Fontaine, 2021, p. 633) as sites of ever-reproducing gendered violence.

“Space,” the “fundamental stuff of geography” (Thrift, 2009, p. 96), is traditionally perceived as a container for human activity (Soja, 2009, p. 2), that holds the capacity to be transformed into a “place” via meaning-making and human relations (Cresswell, 2004). Along this logic, place is seen as a subjective site that encompasses embodied knowledges, (hi)stories, and identities (Cresswell, 2004). Whilst space is defined as an abstract concept that holds “areas and volumes” and encapsulates movement (Cresswell, 2004, p. 8), place is perceived as linked to a sense of security, stability and pause (Tuan, 1997, as cited in Cresswell, 2004) Such a flat geographic gaze reduces the notion of space to a “realm without meaning” or a name (Cresswell, 2004, p. 10), which is directly challenged by Thrift’s notion of space as place, or space/place, troubling the perception of “place as more ‘real’ than space” (Thrift, 2009, p. 102). Commonly used in feminist geography scholarship, space/place encompasses a critical outlook upon reductive Western ideas on what “being,” “human,” and “human places” are (Thrift, 2009). Stressing the
unlimited nature and flexibility of human experience and performance of everyday-ness in space/place, the notion of embodiment is central (McDowell, 1999). Intrinsically linked to space/place, bodies take part in a previously mentioned spatial dance (Thrift, 2009)—often socially or politically loaded—whilst space/place itself plays a crucial role in producing affects and affective connections (Thrift, 2009), therefore giving everyday-ness a rich texture. Ultimately, following Lefebvre’s theorization on “(social) space” (Lefebvre, 2007, p. 73), contemporary geography most commonly interprets space as a socially produced and productive phenomenon that shapes collective activism (Lefebvre, 2007; Jokela-Pansini, 2016). This is explicitly evident via the idea of spatial imaginaries, as frameworks stemming from lived experiences in space and forming a common ground for resistance (Jokela-Pansini, 2016). As such, space/place is seen as full of imaginary potential for social change (Soja, 2010, as cited in Quilty, 2020) and affective possibility.

Intersections between gender and space/place are crucial across feminist and trans* geographies (McDowell, 1999; Nash, 2010). As identified by Nash (2010), trans* geographical inquiry is geared towards the themes of “subjectivity/performativity; experience/embodiment; and the historical, political, and social constitution of what are now called ‘traditional’ LGBTQ or ‘queer’ urban spaces” (p. 579). Likewise, feminist geographies are concerned with embodiment and politics of the body (McDowell, 1999), spatial power asymmetries across the public/divide (Shabazz, 2014), geographies of emotion and affect (Woodward & Lea, 2009), and the overarching fundamental concern around the “social construction of space and place and the ways gender is implicated in those constructions” (Staeheli & Martin, 2000, p. 135). Having in mind the broadness of the two geographic spheres, this paper narrows its focus on geographies of violence as a common thread (with)in feminist and trans* geographies. With the aim to interrogate art’s capacity to question and challenge, and its ability to represent queer gendered existence in space/place, this paper discusses the gender-aware and affect-laden field of performance art.

As a visual medium that is rooted in or stems from distinct time and locality (Sheren, 2015), performance art holds masculinist roots4 yet has a rich feminist history (Fazekaš, 2017). Following the establishment of Judy Chicago’s Womanhouse,5 performance art became a fertile soil for body-centered and site-specific feminist expression (Simonson, 2018; Takac, 2019) which then spread to trans* communities (Kabeya, 2021). Importantly, it has been transformed by both feminist and transgender artists into a politically charged medium that channels gendered rage and fills in voids of women’s or trans* representation (Janak, 2022; Simonson, 2018). As an art form focused on live-ness, physical movement, and impermanence (Tate, n.d.), performance art offers a space for conducting a geographical exploration of gendered violence as it centers the physical body and its social reality, eventually re-establishing visibility of marginalized gendered bodies (MoMA, n.d.; Simonson, 2018).

---

4 As noted by Tate (n.d.), the terms performance and performance art became broadly used in the 1970s, yet its roots are often traced back to 1910s futurism and dadaism, perceived as “apolitical, non-figurative and in many ways low-key masculinist” art movements (Fazekaš, 2017, p. 2).

5 Described as a “beacon of feminist art” (Takac, 2019, para. 1), Womanhouse was the first feminist art exhibition in the world. Opened in California in 1971, it consisted of works from newly trained artists undergoing a unique and unprecedented Feminist Art Program at the California Institute of Art, founded by two established feminist artists, Judy Chicago and Miriam Shapiro. The first of its kind, Womanhouse fully converted a soon-to-be-demolished house into an immersive arts space, by filling it with women-centered installations and performance art evenings (Takac, 2019).
Geographies of Gendered Art

Geography and art are closely linked. A geographic lens can be used to identify all art as a form of communication and representation that personifies subjective stories about everyday lives and offers an array of embodied and spatialized interpretations of the world (Holloway & Hubbard, 2001). As a tool for communicating “place myths” and establishing commonly shared “systems of meaning” (Holloway & Hubbard, 2001, pp. 143-145), art utilizes visual artifacts, signs, and images to construct discourses and knowledge(s) and convey meaning (Holloway & Hubbard, 2001). Culturally specific and therefore spatially shaped, artistic representation constructs “texts” that can be “read,” interpreted, and practiced, offering an opportunity to (re)shape and transform space/place (Holloway & Hubbard, p. 149). As such, representation and therefore art has the power to direct political currents and raise socio-political consciousness (Mullin, 2000). By telling spatialized myths, art creates affective spaces that are inclusive for some, yet exclusive for others.

Feminist art and trans* art are linked via a common focus upon the body, gender, sexuality, space/place, and politics (Janak, 2022; Simonson, 2018). Such art can be defined as embodied acts of resistance or affective resistance (Fontaine, 2021), aimed at dispersing systematic and cultural harms such as heteronormativity (McEwen & Milani, 2014; Quilty, 2020), “chrononormativity” (Freeman, 2010), and patriarchal social structures (Doan, 2010). By meshing life and art (Simonson, 2018) and asserting that the personal is political (Hanisch, 1969/2006), feminist art has been a lens via which complex issues are interrogated. Since its dawn in the late 1960s and a spike in 1970s, it has continuously challenged spatial dichotomies of the public/private divide⁶ and patriarchal notions of domesticity and reproduction (Quilty, 2020; Simonson, 2018), while simultaneously questioning women’s lack of visibility in the art scene (Fazekaš, 2017). Similarly, trans* art is a representation of trans* resistance (Janak, 2022). In analyzing black trans* art, Janak (2022) highlights how transgender creators construct lifeworlds of “safety, care, and community” (p. 259), envision social change, and build a socially just space/place. Additionally, the desire to combat societal erasure and invisibility characterizes transgender art just as it did early feminist art (Heinlein, 2016). Worthy of mention is queer art, as both feminist and trans* creators may choose to fall under this spectrum. Aiming to highlight the “devaluation, marginalisation, and exclusion of queer individuals in modern life” (Takemoto, 2016, p. 87), queer art disregards capitalist and normative logic (Muñoz, 2009; Halberstam, 2011 as cited in Takemoto, 2016). Finally, trans*, feminist, and queer art displays common aims to heighten awareness around identity-based and power-inflicted violence and harms that span across temporal and socio-spatial divides (Fazekaš, 2017; Janak, 2022; Mullin, 2000; Takimoto, 2016). The next section outlines a geographic framework regarding gendered violence and continues to build a thematic locus for an exploration of performance art as a site of change and resistance.

Geographies of Gendered Violence

Gendered and sexualized violence is a pervasive global phenomenon (Foley, 2022), present across the private/public divide, and stretching throughout and beyond spatial and temporal dichotomies (Yadav & Horn, 2021). As noted by Ishii (2021), the issues of gendered violence and sexualized harms stretch along and across categories of class, race and ethnicity, sexuality, ability, and geographic positionality. Recognizing gender-based violence as rooted in patriarchal social structures and binary cultural norms (Ishii, 2021), feminist scholarship, particularly in the field of peace and conflict studies, commonly interrogates a continuum of violence (Kelly, 1988) and

⁶Male domination and establishment of a continuum of violence often stretches across and beyond the domestic sphere into the public sphere (Yadav & Horn, 2021).
employs an expansive rubric of “harm” (Swaine, 2018), linking criminalized acts of gendered violence to the “everyday practices of gendered order” (Hanmer & Saunders, 1984, as cited in Vera-Gray & Fileborn, 2018, p. 79). Similarly, geographies of violence recognize the paradoxical nature of violence, in that it is both extraordinary and ordinary, centering the gendered bodies as both its executors and recipients (Thrift, 2009). Consequently, feminist geography offers an expansive outlook on violence, spanning from research on power-infused uneven geographies (Shabazz, 2014) to analysis of prejudice as a form of oppression (Valentine, 2010) or geographies of fear (Thrift, 2009). Recognizing the limitations of this paper, the following paragraphs look at gendered harms via a prism of spatialized “gender tyranny” (Doan, 2010, p. 635), described below.

Gender tyranny, as outlined in Petra L. Doan’s (2010) auto-ethnographic work, is a form of gendered oppression that is both implicit and explicit (Doan, 2015) and always takes place in gendered spaces (Doan, 2010). Following Mill’s theory of “majority power” (Mill, 1869, as cited in Doan, 2010), Doan notes that the standard for wanted and accepted social, cultural, and political behaviors is established by those in positions of power and harshly administered over marginalized bodies (Doan, 2010, p. 635). In relation to gender, and especially gender-variant individuals, tyranny is enacted and experienced as gendered division of space, as dichotomous, heteronormative, and patriarchal gendered expectations, or as cascades of spatialized disciplinary power (Doan, 2010; Foucault, 1995). As “gender colours every space” one enters (Doan, 2010, p. 636), “gender tyranny” embodies the socio-spatial character of patriarchal and (hetero)normative oppression, expressed via felt vulnerability, lived harassment, and ever-present tyranny across private-public space/place. While Doan commonly refers to gender tyranny as a threat of violence rather than a performed violent act (Doan, 2015), feminist theories of harm and continuums of violence allows one to reframe gender tyranny as a ripe, active, and reproductive form of gender-based violence (Kelly, 1988; Swaine, 2018). Additionally, Fontaine’s (2021) affective atmospheres of “unwelcome” or felt patriarchal threats organically enriches Doan’s (2010) lived testimonies of spatial tyranny and vulnerability exemplify a clear presence of unwelcome affects (Fontaine, 2021). Eventually, heteropatriarchy can be identified as the main drive behind gender tyranny, as it influences and restricts gendered and sexed performances (Quilty, 2020), while socializing the body into “normal” and “natural” gender performativity (Thrift, 2009) existing within dominant societal limitations of respectability and goodness (Quilty, 2020). Moreover, these established ideals flow along a tidily structured straight time of expected (re)productivity and ideals of chrononormative sexual and gendered existence (Dinshaw et al., 2007; Kennedy, 2020), whereby one’s life falls into the “natural” (and necessarily heterosexual) reproductive time frame of birth-marriage-reproduction-death (Halberstam, 2005; Stewart, 2020). Following the above examination of Doan’s (2010) socio-spatial notion of gender tyranny, the subsequent part of this paper analyzes performance art as a tool for gaining understanding of gender tyranny. While looking at both feminist and trans* creations, the themes of gendered bodies in space/place, as well as geographies of gendered violence, are probed.

**Gender Tyranny of “Good” Motherhood: Jodie Hawkes’s Playing Kate**

Jodie Hawkes is a feminist performance artist and lecturer who has been active in the arts scene for over 15 years, both individually and as one half of a performance duo, Search Party

---

7 Harm, as an umbrella term, includes a broad scope of sexualized and gendered violations, and therefore expands the notion of gender-based violence, highlighting that it takes shape beyond tangible and physical acts (Swaine, 2018).
Hawkes & Phillips (n.d., para. 4). Her current artistic practice is rooted in using her own body while questioning maternal performance and socio-spatial representation, explored in her Ph.D. thesis project titled *Playing Kate: Commoning Maternal Performance through Persona as Confrontation and Disruption* (Hawkes, 2018). In 2017, Hawkes started an ongoing site-specific performance series called *Playing Kate*, which aims to question and unsettle dominant neoliberal performances of motherhood (Hawkes, 2018). During a chain of artistic performances including a replication of Kate Middleton’s post-birth hospital departure, Hawkes re-enacted Kate’s public appearances as images of aspirational womanhood for Britain’s working-class. By critically perceiving Kate Middleton as an “embodiment of neoliberal aspiration” in contemporary Britain, Hawkes raises questions around the representations and expectations of motherhood as well as class and privilege (Hawkes, 2018, para. 4). The artist geographically ties her research to hospital doors as “transformative thresholds” where the performance of motherhood begins (para. 8). These magical doorways are characterized as locales that embody one’s transition from the privacy of a hospital to a first-time public appearance as a mother, therefore marking the start of performing motherhood. Through the space/place that (re)shapes women, Hawkes stresses the importance and potentiality of slippages, leakages, disruptions, and ruptures (Larkin, 2021) as everyday affects that construct motherhood. Consequently, the artist troubles Middleton’s maternal appearance outside the hospital, defining it as lacking metamorphosis and displaying glossy and unchanged—and therefore unrealistic—womanhood. Re-establishing a class-infused aspirational iconography of motherhood, the performative reproduction of Kate’s uninterrupted personhood, and the reproduction of the royals’ “staged normality” (Hawkes, 2018, para. 4), fuels gendered debates around hierarchies of motherly performances in space/place. Ultimately, whilst clearly exhibiting the dichotomous divide of “good” vs. “bad” motherhood, Hawkes’s *Playing Kate* identifies an implicit gendered tyranny atmospherically present in cultural norms. The ever-present expectations of productive, normative, rupture-free, and linear motherhood present a type of gender tyranny that is driven by heteropatriarchal notions of a “good mother subject” as a “pinnacle of the good sexual citizen” (Quilty, 2020, pp. 60-61), omnipresent in societies driven by chrononormative politics and reproductive futurism (Dinshaw et al., 2007; Freeman, 2010; Stewart, 2020). Ultimately, while using her own post-birth body in a personal-political sense (Hanisch, 1969/2006), Hawkes re-captures iconic yet unrealistic post-birth appearances of Middleton, exposing disparities across social classes of motherhood. Artistically embodying sharp expectations for women to remain reproductive yet unchanged, *Playing Kate* reveals neoliberal normalcy and the notion of motherly “goodness” as a form of gender tyranny (Doan, 2010; Hawkes, 2018; Quilty, 2020). *Playing Kate* leaves an open-ended question—can a mother, as a

---

8Founded in England in 2005 with Hawkes and her partner Pete Philips, *Search Party* is a collaborative performance and theater duo. Their work, as the artists claim, “playfully disrupts our position(s) in the world, as underdogs, as parents, as consumers, as lovers, as strangers, as ageing bodies, as armchair sports fans, as generation-renters, as amateur runners, and as timid climate activists” (Hawkes & Phillips, n.d., para. 4).

9*Playing Kate* stems from a performance by *Search Party* called *My Son and Heir* (2012), as an affective response to Kate Middleton having her first child. Responding to the “mass spectacle” of royal pregnancy and birth, this performance demonstrates that messiness, difficulties, and exhaustion are a crucial part of parenthood, even if the “absurdity” of royal parenthood does not contain these variables (Larkin, 2021). Overall, it highlights how different maternal performances may be in “broken Britain” (Hawkes, 2018, para. 2), depending on one’s class and social position.

10Hawkes’s research responds to “repli-Kating”—a cultural and social phenomenon that is specific to the online realm, gathering women and mothers who want to replicate the outfits of Kate, the Duchess of Cambridge (Hawkes, 2022), signaling how contagious and widely spread royal aspirations are among women.
gendered and sexed citizen, ever perform a spatial dance that is good enough (Quilty, 2020; Thrift, 2009)?

**Gender Tyranny of Regulated Space: Cassils’s PISSED**

Cassils is a transgender visual and performance artist working within the themes of LGBTQI+ struggle, survival, and resistance (Cassils, n.d.). Inspired by an idea that “bodies are formed in relation to forces of power and social expectations” (Cassils, n.d., para. 1), Canadian born and California based Cassils utilizes their own body as a canvas and a protagonist, whilst creating interdisciplinary, sculptural, immersive performance art (Kabeya, 2021). As a critique of public spaces that inscribe and enforce gendered norms upon individuals and their bodies (Johnston & Longhurst, 2010), Cassils’s *PISSED* is one of their most known pieces, installed and performed in New York in 2017 (STIRworld, 2022). It illustrates Doan’s theorization of gender tyranny as being both implicit and explicit (Doan, 2015) and often spatially exercised via a disciplinary power by surveilling one’s space/place and time across the social (gendered) body (Doan, 2010; Foucault, 1995). As a multi-dimensional artwork, *PISSED* consists of a sculpture, a sound installation, a photo series, and both long-duration and site-specific performances. Described simply as a “minimalist glass cube (…) [that] contains 200 gallons of glowing urine” (Cassils, 2017), *PISSED* is a personal-political artwork (Hanisch, 1969/2006). Constructed using Cassils’ urine that was collected during the long-duration performance, *PISSED* came to life as a response to Trump’s administration rolling back an Obama-era executive order that allowed trans* students to use public bathrooms according to their gender identities (Cassils, 2017; STIRworld, 2022). Manifesting anger and solidarity, Cassils collected their urine in medical bottles, while navigating public and private spaces/places, for over 200 days. Experiencing the discomfort of having to “hold their piss” enabled, in Cassils words, a hyper-performance of feelings that gender nonconforming and trans* people experience every day (VICE News, 2018). Cassils (2017) notes that their idea to make “a cube of piss” was an “insane” but crucial extremity to expand people’s understanding of anti-trans* violence (VICE News, 2018). Eventually, a sculpture consisting of preserved urine was constructed as a sign of explicit embodiment of anti-trans* gender tyranny (Doan, 2010). Marking the end of collecting urine for a totality of 4,800 hours, Cassils opened the exhibition of *PISSED* with a final two-hour performance named *Fountain*. Standing on a platform with a backdrop of 255 dated medical bottles that were used to collect Cassils’s urine, the artist spent two hours standing, drinking, and publicly urinating in a bottle, outlining that anti-trans* tyranny may appear whilst the most mundane daily gestures and acts are taking place (Cassils, 2017). Above all, court recordings from Gavin Grimm’s case were used to fill the room with a young transgender man’s resistance to his school’s discriminatory policies which denied him access to the boy’s bathroom for over five years.13 Bursting with an atmosphere of unwelcome

11It was installed in Leslie-Lohman Museum of Art (formerly known as Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art) in 2017 and purchased for its permanent collection in March 2022 (STIRworld, 2022).
12Made in collaboration with Robin Black, the photo series *Alchemic* consisted of abstract images of Cassils’s body, celebrating “self-determined trans embodiment” (Cassils, 2017, para. 10).
13In September 2015, a high schooler Gavin Grimm sued his school in Virginia, as his right to use the boy’s bathroom was denied by a newly adopted policy that prohibited kids “with gender identity issues” from using the same bathrooms as other boys or girls, according to their chosen gender identities (ACLU, 2021, para. 1). The mentioned policy reflected the negative reactions from Gavin’s peers and their parents to Gavin coming out as a transgender boy. For the rest of his school years and beyond, Gavin was limited to using an alternative private facility instead of the boy’s bathroom, as a preliminary injunction that would have enabled him to use the boy’s restroom was denied whilst
(Fontaine, 2022), the audio-piece was designed to drown the anti-trans* voices from Gavin’s trial in a fluctuating “sonic landscape of water” (Cassils, 2017, para. 7), simultaneously allowing the trans teenager’s voice to clearly travel across the gallery space. The soundscape embodied a burst of affective resistance (Fontaine, 2021) as a response to the lingering sense of injustice and oppression—an atmosphere of unwelcome—that PISSED effectively represents, as experienced by transgender individuals on a daily basis. Ultimately, believing that healing is as important as being angry (VICE News, 2018), Cassils immersed their audience in a space/place where gendered violence was brutally felt, while affective hope was clearly present.

Final Thoughts: Art as Embodied Resistance, Art as Affective Coalition

In these two examples of contemporary performative expression—Hawkes’s Playing Kate (2018) and Cassils’s PISSED (2017)—common themes of societal critique, resistance to norms, and potentialities for transformation arise. Stemming from lived and embodied experiences of socio-spatial limitations, rules, and oppression, such as the gendered tyrannies of heteronormativity (Quilty, 2020), chrononormativity (Freeman, 2010), patriarchal structures (Doan, 2010), and disciplinary power (Foucault, 1995), these artworks reveal commonalities across feminist and trans* gendered oppressions running along a continuum of heteropatriarchal violence (Kelly, 1988; McEwen & Milani, 2014). While Hawkes performs her “spatial dance” in between hospital doors (Hawkes, 2018; Thrift, 2009), protesting against the ideals of “good” motherhood in the space/place of present-day Britain (Hawkes, 2018; Quilty, 2020), Cassils dares to take up space through their choreography that exposes one’s mundane physical needs and the private-made-public rage, challenging the logic of heteronormativity that is prevalent in the space/place of the contemporary U.S. (Cassils, 2017).

Through their work, both of the analyzed artists demonstrate embodied bravery to radically reimagine one’s social and spatial existence (Khasnabish, 2014). Illustrating their private and varied experiences of public gender tyranny through their bodies, Hawkes and Cassils queer and question the atmosphere of unwelcome they live within (Fontaine, 2021). Oceans apart, both artists demonstrate how heavy the atmosphere, filled with normative expectations, is for feminist women and trans* people. Using their bodies as blank canvases, and the language of performance art as their ink, Hawkes and Cassils draw fresh contours of life beyond violent binaries (McEwen & Milani, 2014), reimagining public spaces without gender(ed) tyranny. From public hospitals to private family homes, from public streets to private bathrooms, spaces/places are challenged via these acts of feminist irony and trans* anger. As female “goodness” and trans* “deviancy” are dissected and questioned through these performances (McEwan & Milani, 2014; Quilty, 2020), bodily experiences of gendered harms are simultaneously made visible and accessible to viewers who exist outside the maternal or gender-queering identities and bodies. Thus, Hawkes’s and Cassils’s artworks act as roadmaps into the experiences of marginalized voices and lives of harmed gendered bodies (Doan, 2010; MoMA, n.d.; Simonson, 2018).

Overall, Hawkes’s and Cassils’s art pieces can be defined as “doings” of feminist and trans-positive affective resistance (Fontaine, 2021), as they disrupt the socio-spatial atmospheres of unwelcome consisting of everyday harms. As such, these atmospheres are different, yet equally unjust, for both feminist women and trans* people. Simultaneously, through an analysis of Playing

---

Heteronormativity can be found beyond the U.S., especially in geographies dominated by Western knowledge(s) on gender and sexuality (McEwen & Milani, 2014).

---
Kate (2018) and PISSED (2017), the potential for coalition and artistic communion becomes evident. Feminist and trans* “agendas do not have to melt together or shed their distinctness” in order to work towards common social justice goals (Livingstone, 2017, para. 10; Faye, 2021), but a common ground for protest and rage may be established against the shared enemy of heteropatriarchal gender tyranny (Kelly, 1988; McEwen & Milani, 2014).

Ultimately, through this paper, performance art, and thus art in a broader sense, reveals itself as a birthplace of social and spatial imaginaries and a basis for collectively reimagining and challenging spaces/places (Jokela-Pansini, 2016). Displaying an intrinsic nature of being affective and personal, and therefore political (Hanisch, 1969/2006), art holds a capacity to center marginalized gendered bodies and their embodied experiences across geographies. Thus, art is a crucial tool in building textured, multi-faceted, and experience-centered knowledge(s) around gendered bodies and spaces/places as well as varied socio-spatial harms. Overall, as an affective medium, art provokes social critiques and spatial metamorphoses whilst contributing to achieving socio-spatial justice for all—from a rebellious mother to a rightfully-pissed trans* person.

References


