

Performance Art as an Act of Defiance  
Queering Identity Paradigms

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## **Queering Paradigms**

From cradle, we are introduced to the “structural” binaries of the world. We are told the distinction between the strong and the weak, hero and villain, good and evil; tales about a savior and a lost cause. Most of us take the truthfulness of a told story for granted, never having our minds fixated on the thought of questioning these antitheses with a naive attitude of a child, who will ask the hows and whys of each tale so insistently, until is provided with a satisfactory substantiation. Questioning, like a filter, cleans the rust off of the stale metal. It is while interrogating narratives that these stories grow on us to shape worlds around us and, indelibly, worlds within.

Stories are told on a daily basis. For hundreds of thousands of years, stories are repeatedly reiterated on the loop of blindfolded history. And there always are voices that will create value around one’s narrative. And so, history gulps them in, absorbs them, consumes them, to then repeat itself. The serpent eats its tail, and the loop goes on. But what if the real difference between the binary mentality we are long accustomed to is just a question away, “Who is telling the story?” It is at this point when the binaries permeate into each other and merge, revealing the fluidity in between. Now that we get to hear and read more from the other side of the story, a range of untold, silenced stories surface before us. Today’s imperative for us has taken another shape, one within the realm of reason, that is *choosing*, from that colorful, dissimilar yet equally unique stock of options, the story that is worthy of breaking the silence, and above all,

worthy of breaking through the noise of incessantly reiterated yet unsubstantiated, irrational tales.

We are now *responsible* more than ever and *in charge of* what to read, whom to listen to, what to believe in, and insisting on what content we want to be taught for our lives, but above all, choosing the unaltered story to plant into the collective consciousness of the human race.

Female voices occupy a space too cramped, especially on the periphery of the Armenian tradition. Their legacies are largely ignored, their stories silenced. Crisis rests on the importance of the female body, its natural propulsion. Defiance is born out of the conflict with her cerebral urges. Rendered under the lens of female experience, *m i n d s p a c e* explores identity within and beyond Her mental interiorities.

## **Performing Identity, Storying the Self**

The quest for identity is a performative act.

In the recorded history of humankind, research and numbers demonstrate that we have developed radically during the last two centuries. While the human civilizations created, travelled and explored extensively over six millennia, the range of our mobility has drastically changed only in the last two hundred years. Now, after the turn of another century, being granted with almost all achievable metrics of an advanced civilization, with opportunities of better education, longevity, and healthier life, we are examining concepts such as artificial intelligence. According to *Our World in Data* (2011), life expectancy has been doubled, average working hours halved, abject poverty eradicated in less than a hundred years. We do not, however, seem to be feeling better, more satisfied. Coming this far, we are living in 'a state of societal seasickness,' as Brody (2017) names it, where none of us is entirely sure how to fit into the world we have rewritten. And the question, "Who am I?" so abundantly asked in the air still remains hardly articulated. We lose titles, become ambiguous every now and then and too often become unrecognizable to ourselves when we sacrifice consistency. Our identity struggle has become undeniable - in the pursuit of learning who we are, we cannot yet unplug ourselves from the global noise, from all social constructs, we cannot stop seeking outside validation, and move inward. Cedrice Webber claims that, "One voice stripped down to share an honest struggle can inspire others to share their own story. Many voices can then come together around one theme and

harmonize into a larger identity conversation” (Webber, 2018, 11:34–11:43). This project aims to test whether facing crisis will help the viewer gain clarity, or at least some acceptance of their individual journey on their own.

## Key terms and definitions

### **Deep Diving into the Roots**

*Mindspace* – an alteration of mindscape, a mental landscape; the world of the mind. The range of a person's thoughts and imagination, regarded as a panorama capable of being contemplated by another person; mental landscape or inner vision. The landscape of thoughts, a reification of the domain of imaginary entities, memories, feelings, ideas, fears or any other object in the mind, seen together as making up metaphoric features (*Oxford Dictionaries, Urban Dictionary*).

*Identity* - the characteristics determining who or what a person or thing is. (*Oxford Dictionaries*).

*Binary* - in sociology and linguistics, a pair of related yet opposite in meaning terms or concepts.

*Ouroboros* - the serpent that eats its tail. It symbolizes the formless chaos surrounding the orderly world and contributes to the world's periodic renewal.

### **Herstory, Voices of the Past**

The concept of identity crisis, coined in psychology, refers to the inability to gain the identity of ego during adolescence. The term “identity crisis” was first devised by German psychologist Erik Erikson. According to his studies of identity crisis in an autobiographical perspective (Erikson, 1970), during this process, individuals may be challenged in the development of a strong sense of identity. Therefore, some people experiencing this crisis may refer to the process as trying to “find themselves.” The consequences of the crisis may include the loss of the conception of who one is, disengagement or disinterest in ordinary life or previously established relationships, and inability to make choices that affect the future of the individual. For the ego to be adequately formed, Erikson claims that a sense of fidelity has to be established, so that the individual is in the know of their character, of their relationships with other people, the sincerity and the genuineness of these bonds (Erikson, 1970).

As the capstone project is rendered under the lens of female experience, the effects of an identity crisis on female bodies are the main focus of this research. Interestingly, the research of Caroline K. Waterman and Jeffrey S. Nevid (1977) in the 70s showed that females are more susceptible to identity crises than men are. Waterman and Nevid based their research on sex differences between identity crises on Erikson’s theory of “inner space” of the female experience. According to the article, females are more prone to experience the crisis, in some regards, because of the premarital sexual politics. As identity crisis has an effect on different

identity status of the individual, encompassing everything from occupation to religion, the expectations are different for women than for men. Most fascinating is the fact that in the resolution of the identity crisis, every factor of the experience was roughly the same for both women and men, except sex. Sexual identity, especially the value of virginity before marriage, was taken to be of a greater importance in women than in men (Waterman et al, 1977). This idiosyncratic importance of the need to turn inward instead of projecting outwards makes females more central to the research of crisis, its effects And manifestations.

Project *Womanhouse* (Demetrakas et al., 1972) presents collaborative art created by twenty one women who lived and worked in a shared communal space, and is the Feminist Art Program of the California Institute of the Arts, 1971-72, featuring prominent artists of the time, Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro. It is in a format of a 47 minute-long video recording originally released as a motion picture in 1974, providing visual material on how female artists of various backgrounds gathered in a house to perform together. This work particularly is a significant inspiration for the capstone project, just as *Ablutions*, one of the scripted performances that was skipped out from the framework of *Womanhouse* and was only staged once after dismantling it, is used as a basis for the performance script, adapted to meet the needs of the researched topic.

One of the most exciting developments in the portrayal of the female identity crisis is through the realm of filmmaking. From the early 2000s, a trend of movies about psychologically challenged women started to come out, with themes of the main characters losing their sense of self. Most of

David Lynch's filmography is about the experience of losing one's identity. Remarkably, most of these main characters are women (Beckman, 2012). The most prominent examples of an identity crisis in Lynch productions are his TV series, *Twin Peaks*, and his 2000 movie, *Mulholland Drive*. In these two, the main characters, Laura Palmer, and Diane Selwyn are disillusioned over what is real and what is not after a series of traumatic experiences. In both of the cases, the pivotal moment that pushes these women to lose their sense of self is a sexual relationship. In *Mulholland Drive*, the main character is invested in a same-sex love affair that is not reciprocated, pushing her over the edge. In *Twin Peaks*, Laura Palmer is traumatized and decides to end her life after becoming aware that the spirit that was sexually assaulting her for most of her teenage years rests in the body of her father. Therefore, these two feature films, that are seen through a male directorial gaze, posit sexual identity to be significant for the overall female identity and possible trauma that may very well be the initiator to having a crisis.

However, Erikson's "inner space" of the female identity is not the only difference that is manifested in the display of the identity crisis in visual arts. In Darren Aronofsky's *Black Swan*, the main character climbs the ladders to her destruction, obliterating her sense of self at the end of the narrative (Fisher & Jacobs, 2011). In both this film and Aronofsky's previous *Requiem for a Dream*, the camera is uncomfortably close to the faces of the actors, especially that of Natalie Portman and Jennifer Connelly. In both *Black Swan* and *Requiem for a Dream*, the camera, slowly moving closer into the personal space of the character, outlines the escalating collapse of a personality. While both films have the element of sexual identity in their

narratives, they, especially *Black Swan*, additionally explore the importance of understanding the drives of the self. Because both Portman's and Connelly's characters are subservient to their addictions – perfection and heroin, respectively, they lose their sense of the self because of the expectations. Portman's character loses herself by killing her sexually liberated self, manifested before her eyes, while Connelly loses all hope for retaliation after participating in degrading acts to secure her daily dose of heroin. In both movies, the main characters do not see prospects beyond the ones that they have gifted their lives to – dance and drugs (Fisher & Jacobs, 2011). That is mostly because of their inability to develop their ego outside their addictions.

Moreover, the central act in *Black Swan*, the dance is susceptible to having an identity crisis itself. Ballet or any form of the performative act in general has an identity crisis because there is no clear relationship between the performer and the performance. The performance does not belong to the performer; the performer is just like another inhabitant of the performance: they occupy it for a while and then they leave its skin. Therefore, the idea that the same character can be performed by different artists may create an identity crisis for the fictional creation (Armelagos & Sirridge, 1978). According to Terry Smith (2010), the performative act itself can adopt the issues of identification. Because of the vast scope of modern art, an identity crisis does not have to be portrayed by real people or a narrative, the performance itself can manifest as having a crisis in its personality. For example, avant-garde art faced an identity crisis with the invention of sound cinema. As the tradition of experimental art has always

relied on the non-existence of sound in the composition, integration into a new art form, which was reliant on both audio and video proved to be a challenge (Carroll, 1998). As cinema merged two independently standing media, painting with music, the later suffered substantially because its uniqueness might have easily been lost by its newfound polymorphism to the soundscape. In other words, one was thought to shade the other, instead of complementing it, similar to how photography was treated, at the turn of the 19th century, in comparison with painting - inferior, mechanical, unartistic, and lacking skill.

Still, avant-garde cinema exists and is recognized as bearing the qualities of the works in the vein of experimentation. *Meshes of the Afternoon*, a 1943 short movie directed by Maya Deren and her husband Alexander Hammid, is an example of avant-garde artists sticking to an exclusive part of the cinema - its visual language (Jacobs, 1948). In this short film, the main female character literally spirals to her own insanity, her subconscious fears awakened by a dream. The character follows an unknown figure with a mirror instead of a face, possibly connotative of the character's inability to look into her own loneliness. As the plot escalates, the irrational embodiments of the shades of her personality enter the picture only to attempt to murder her. When she finally wakes up from her dream, she seemingly experiences another one, one where she tries to kill a man that gently puts her to sleep. Perhaps, the movie is about remembrance of a past relationship, one that still haunts her because it left her completely alone with herself chasing her own projection over and over again until she can no more. The symbolic nature of the objects used to

convey a certain meaning are critical both in Deren's movie and the performance staged by me. The universal perception of these tools plays a crucial role in the establishment of contact with the spectator.

The act of losing one's identity can be also displayed through dance. Combining the action of reminiscence and personal philosophy with the history of dance, Fraleigh (2004) provides an unusual outlook at how one's self can be intertwined with a performative art in *Dancing Identity: Metaphysics in Motion*. As the book is aimed at readers acquainted with the evolution of dance techniques, an analysis by Tanya Calamoneri and Marta Eddy (2006) is selected as a guide through the complex web of Fraleigh's book of poetry, essays, and dance. In the narrative of the book, Fraleigh slowly creates a tension between the cerebral aspiration for her routine to find its place in the echelon of high art and the primal nature of settling for the bodily expression. This conflict in the larger narrative of the piece is indicative of the moments that Fraleigh has to confront her identity crisis. Sometimes she is not able to find herself choosing either side of the conflict, her indecision imprinted on the confused and complex nature of her work. As the book is not structured linearly, the narrative jumps back and forth to create an approximate memoir of the author with shades of her identity sneaking sprinkled throughout.

What is lost in mind can be acted upon the body as the movements of the muscles, joints, and tissues can represent the disruptions of the self. Modern dance has tried to replicate the processes of the mind by manipulating the performers' bodies. Zhang Huan, a Shanghai artist, is of the opinion that the body is the identity itself (Huan, Liuming, & Zhijian, 1999).

Zhang Huan's performances concentrate on these aspects of discovering or losing one's sexuality, gender, public and private sexual encounters. For Huan, the body is a 'language' that can be used to convey any sentence, any emotion with the directness of physicality of the expression. Therefore, the inability of the self to express its identity can similarly be translated into the physical manifestations of the body. Considering that the predominant exploration is of the female identity crisis, the body may be the best way to express the oblivion of the state. As the principal reasons for the crisis can be attributed to the loss of the bodily expectations of being female, the most natural way to express the loss of identity of the body is through the physical. Lee Bul, a contemporary South Korean artist, placed a similar emphasis on the importance of the body in her installation of future human bodies as cyborgs, devoid of any identity (Murray, 2008). In her art, cyborgs represent the sectors of the population deprived of their status because of their gender, race, or sexuality. The bodies of the cyborgs are modeled after the expectations of female bodies normalized by patriarchal society. The evolution of the female body is shown to be in complete oblivion over its identity, as it becomes a product that can be sold to the means of the population.

As the creative section of the capstone project is of a graphic nature and encompasses the elements of a female identity crisis in its presentation, the final exploration is of Pina Bausch, perhaps the most influential figure in performative art of the last century. Pina Bausch staged her acts with a dedicated group of dancers; the uniformity of all moves was to create the image of their creator (Mercy, 2018). Therefore, the

dancers had to strive to become Pina Bausch. Each of them was a little part of the whole. Bausch most probably did not have an identity crisis, and it does not matter if she did. Her approach of fragmenting herself into the dancers is an exciting idea and a symbolic one, if it is to be applied to the possible staging of a character's identity crisis. As with most of the artists already mentioned, Bausch either went for gender-neutral characters or exclusively female performers. Most of her dances have an air of sudden and violent movements, of being completely confused or baffled by the atmosphere or the state of mind (Mercy, 2018).

## Research questions

### **Mirroring Gazes**

If a performance so graphic turns into an explanatory showcase of the struggle of exploring identity beyond the established paradigms, how is it then echoed in the mind of the active beholder? Will an audience member, who has ever experienced or is currently going through the burdensome stage of surfing through the identity spectrum, recognize themselves in the mirroring of their state? What types of communicative paths will the performance beget? And most importantly, does the distance between the stage and the audience make the latter more willing to associate and identify with the performer's conflict or does it rather alienate and push them into further denial of noticing any parallels between the performers experience and their own?

### **Staging the Self: Compositional Interpretation**

The creative section of the capstone project is a performance, an assemblage of silent acts of a graphic nature and a solo dance piece, based on the methods of the project *Womanhouse*. The performance medium aims to showcase the causes, symptoms and the course of identity exploration and collisions with the outside world, through symbolic elements, a set of signs and metaphors. A qualitative methodology, in a form of post-performance discussion, is utilized to collect data about the impressions of the local population. An audience of varied backgrounds was invited to the staging of the performance. The final findings are used to develop a comprehensive analysis, in the conclusion section. The performance is an experimental attempt aiming to tackle the preconceptions, stereotyping and stigma around the phenomena of subject formation, identity politics, individual integrity and the clash amongst them, through a non-threatening and impactful platform that is the stage. The performance aims to bring a significant marginalized category, that includes anyone who disagrees with conventional paradigms about identity politics, at the center of attention.

The setting of the visual imagery of the performance space is designed in accordance with the methods of Gillian Rose's *Visual Methodologies*, 2001. As we start encountering the world in more of its visual forms, it is critical to take into consideration of what is seen, how it is seen, who sees it, and who doesn't. Having in mind that the audience is

interpreting the visual material while addressing questions of cultural meaning and power, and that visual modes of conveying meaning differ from that of other modes, I have generated an assemblage of visible and invisible signs in forms of metaphors. Props, as the main visual objects of a theatrical scene, activate a certain way of seeing, while the performer on the stage mobilizes another. I have taken into consideration all three, technological, compositional, and social aspects of a production of visual imagery. The selected color patterns and attributes are to convey a collapsed sense of time and space. The meaning of an image is made by its audience who is equipped with a specific kind of knowledge and arrives in the house of the stage with already formed ways of seeing. Thus, the imagery has been organized in a way to achieve the anticipated effect on the spectator, wagering that the latter will have the means of appropriating and deciphering its symbolism. While the audience is the key analytical focus, however, the above mentioned method is used carefully, for the imagery not to corrupt its primal intention. The choice of rendering the performance without speech is not random, as text can be disruptive with its multiple denotations and connotations, whereas an image, while still oblique, is more instinctually straightforward – the perception of the color red is cross-cultural, for instance; a recollection of blood, it incites feelings of fear, aggression, agitation. The performer, on the other hand, is instructed to enter into a trance-like state of mind, where temporal and spatial properties are fleeting, while she remains conflicted in a fluctuating alter-reality. She is a vessel of universal characteristics, a collective image of the past and present women having encountered crisis in identity

formation. Sound is parallel to the visual imagery – synchronous and related to the mood of the scene in the beginning, but will sometimes transform into contrapuntal – commentative and opposing the visual imagery. Music compositions by Philip Glass, György Ligeti, Alfred Schnittke, Igor Stravinsky, Max Richter were incorporated into the sound design of the performance.

## Research findings & analysis

### **In Retrospect**

My research in general shows that the female identity crisis rests on the importance of the female body and its sexuality. Thus, if one were to explain the process of a woman going through an identity crisis, the most practical way would be to show her struggling against her bodily expectations by violent and graphic displays of defiance, which I sought to achieve through the creative part of the capstone. And most importantly, it was a discovery that what gets lost in the mindspace can be augmented by the body language, replicating the interior processes by manipulating the exteriority.

Another research finding is that "his" perspective of "herstory" and her view of it still tend to drastically differ from each other. In the post-performance discussion, opinions, although not unanimously, but tended to curiously divide between the two sexes. The discussion revealed that most female audience members could recognize and associate patterns from the performance similar to their own experiences, while

some male audience members expected a more “percussive,” not “delicate” performance, which is understandable inasmuch as identification concerns, as, in the visual arts, striking movements, and angular shapes are associated more with males, whereas curvy, organic patterns, and circular shapes are generally associated with women. The discussion with males mostly led to inquisitively opposing communicative paths, while females expressed inquisitively complementing insight. A most valuable observation is the fact that audience members of both sexes were genuinely interested in the interpretation, doing multiple layers of “readings,” and were willing to interrogate the narrative unfolded before their eyes.

Limitations and avenues for future research

### **Prospects in Performative Arts**

Although widely known in the West since the 1960s, performative arts have reached their zenith worldwide only over the last decade. However, Armenian art historiography reveals little attention to performative arts as a genre, making it the least developed discipline of contemporary art in Armenia, mostly because of sociological, educational and economic issues. But above all hindering the development of performance art in Armenia, is the factor that the Armenian society still has a traditionalist approach when it comes to the concepts of the body, nudity, sex, gender or feminism. Performance artists are also viewed skeptically, and sometimes even marginalized, because they use their bodies radically as form,

content and media (Performance Art and Armenian Contemporary Art roundtable discussion, ArtBridge, 2019). Performance art is not integrated into the art curricula of local institutions, while the local art market does not show much interest toward the collection, documentation, presentation and archiving of the few self-initiated performative acts in Armenia. The sociological limitations and educational gaps provide fertile ground for future research in the field, as well as prospects of enhancing and developing the local educational curricula.

## Conclusion

### **What Still Remains**

All our personal stories inevitably wear out as our memory is often an unreliable narrator, vulnerable to alteration. But it is also the key to our identity. Our memories tend to make us who we are, a sum of the fragments of our life. Through this puzzle, we come to understand ourselves and the world around us better. And so, the stories we choose to reiterate into memory ought to be ones that keep us intact and sentient.

M i n d s p a c e was an attempt to reenact a female-centric vision from a quaquaversal, inwardly oriented mental territory. Focusing on storying identity through visual explorations of performance, we have discovered the feeling of being removed from oneself, and the sense of an absence that is so constant it becomes the norm. Information is power, but it has truly become pervasive and facing the controversial dichotomy of trying to be genuinely yourself while also being a valid member of society, sometimes prevents us from living presently. In our times, when this is a

topical subject more than it has ever been before, it is critical to capture what it is to exist more authentically in a turbulent ocean of encroaching crowds, and to always keep in mind a lesson from Mr. Ralph Waldo Emerson, that "To be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else is the greatest accomplishment."

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## **Appendix**

Part 1 and 2 of the performance

Part 1:

<https://drive.google.com/open?id=Idj-7Xe6aAJc9hZekImSLQbc93oCE8nvZ>

Part 2:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/17ufVxb5ifIDIQ-ANAUlPu4RvkKPYsleX/view>