

SYNAESTHETIC DRESS: EPISODES OF SENSATIONAL OBJECTS IN PERFORMANCE  
ART, 1955-1975

By  
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Submitted to the graduate degree program in the Kress Foundation Department of Art History  
and the Graduate Faculty of the University of Kansas in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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## Abstract

This study examines the significance of clothing-like sculptural forms in the performance practices of three international postwar and contemporary artists: Atsuko Tanaka (Japanese, 1932-2005), Hélio Oiticica (Brazilian, 1937-1980) and Robert Kushner (American, b. 1949). These three artists occupy a special position within the development of performance and body art during the postwar decades for their focus on the sensorial and interactive properties of clothing-like objects. I propose the new term of synaesthetic dress as an interpretive concept to characterize and study the wearable, multi-sensory, and participatory forms in their diverse practices and as a strategy for collaboration and social engagement. My research seeks an understanding of how Tanaka, Oiticica, and Kushner draw upon the language of clothing—a form that typically contains and defines the individual body—to create alternative material, social, and artistic sites for collective experience. Counter to traditional interpretations of clothing that tend to view it as a marker or relic of the artist's body, or as a material that can construct, perform or contest various identities, this study proposes to see—or rather—sense clothing in a new light, through the thought-provoking performances of artists who foreground the multisensory experience of their audiences and participants. This project advances the importance of embodied experience in performance practices and contributes to an evolving body of art historical scholarship that addresses the entire human sensorium in aesthetic encounters.

## **Acknowledgments**

This dissertation has been guided by countless individuals who have provided unwavering support and encouragement. My advisor, David Cateforis, has been a constant source of excellent advice and constructive feedback while reading through multiple drafts. He has greatly shaped the final form of this study with his insights and offered me encouragement when I needed it the most. Thanks also to my fellow committee members, Maki Kaneko, John Pultz, and May Tveit, for their helpful feedback and participation in my defense. A special thank you to Charles Eldredge, for his support and mentorship over the years. I am also grateful for the mentorship of Susan Earle, who set me on the curatorial path I'm on now, and to Robert Kushner, for sharing his memories and perspective with me.

I would also like to extend my gratitude to the generous donors who supported my dissertation research, including contributors to the Eldredge, Stokstad, Li Travel award, which enabled my travels to Pittsburgh and New York to see key exhibitions and artworks discussed in this project, and the Doctoral Student Research Award, which supported my travels to the Archives of American Art in Washington, D.C to conduct research on Robert Kushner.

Finally, I am grateful for the constant support of my family and friends. Thanks to my mom and dad, my biggest cheerleaders from day one, Daniel, Ellen, Morgan, Laura, Corinne, Clare, and of course, Geo. From Kansas to California, with love.

## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	iii
Acknowledgements .....	iv
List of Figures .....	vi
Introduction .....	1
Chapter 1: The Shock of Sight: Envisioning Atsuko Tanaka's <i>Electric Dress</i> .....	12
Chapter 2: Revolution in Motion? Hélio Oiticica's <i>Parangolés</i> .....	52
Chapter 3: Radical Edibles: Food, Fashion and Taste in <i>Robert Kushner and Friends Eat Their Clothes</i> .....	93
Epilogue: Continuing Threads .....	140
Bibliography .....	156

## List of Figures

### Chapter 1

1. Atsuko Tanaka, *Electric Dress*, 1956. 2<sup>nd</sup> Gutai Art Exhibition, Ōhara Kaikan, Tokyo, c. October 11-17, 1956. Synthetic paint on incandescent lightbulbs, electric cords, and control console, approximately 165 x 80 x 80 cm. Takamatsu City Museum of Art, Japan. © Itō Ryōji and the former members of the Gutai Art Association. Image courtesy of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.
2. Atsuko Tanaka, *Electric Dress*, 1956. 2<sup>nd</sup> Gutai Art Exhibition, Ōhara Kaikan, Tokyo, c. October 11-17, 1956. Synthetic paint on incandescent lightbulbs, electric cords, and control console, approximately 165 x 80 x 80 cm. Takamatsu City Museum of Art, Japan. © Itō Ryōji and the former members of the Gutai Art Association. Image courtesy of the Museum of Osaka University, Osaka, Japan.
3. Atsuko Tanaka, *Calendar*, c. 1954. Ink and pencil on paper, collage, 38 x 54 cm. Ashiya City Museum of Art and History, Ashiya, Japan. Image courtesy of Artstor.
4. Atsuko Tanaka, *Work (6)*, 1955. Ink and oil pastel on cotton, 81.7 x 62.3 cm. Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo, Tokyo, Japan.
5. Atsuko Tanaka, *Work (Yellow Cloth)*, 1955. Commercially dyed cotton, three parts, 100 x 208 cm and 100 x 377 cm. Gallery HAM, Nagoya, Japan. © Itō Ryōji, courtesy Gallery HAM.
6. Atsuko Tanaka, *Work (Pink Rayon)*, 1955 (reconstruction, 1961). Pink rayon fabric, 32 ft. 9 ¾ in. x 32 ft. 9 ¾ in. (10 x 10 m). Not extant (photograph © Itō Ryōji, provided by Ashiya City Museum of Art and History).
7. Reconstruction of Atsuko Tanaka's *Work (Pink Rayon)*, 1955. Reconstruction 2002, Hofgarten, Innsbruck. Photo courtesy of Galerie im Taxispalais, Innsbruck, Austria.
8. Kazuo Shiraga, *Work II*, 1958. Oil on paper, mounted on canvas, 183 x 243 cm. Hyōgo Prefectural Museum of Art, Kobe. © Shiraga Hisao, courtesy Hyōgo Prefectural Museum of Art.
9. Shōzō Shimamoto, *Hurling Colors*, 1956. Photograph of performance at Second Gutai Exhibition in Tokyo, Japan at Ōhara Kaikan Hall, October 11-17, 1956.
10. Motonaga Sadamasa, *Work (Water)*, 1956. Polyethylene, water, dye, and rope, dimensions variable. Installation view: *Outdoor Gutai Art Exhibition*, Ashiya Park, Ashiya, July 27–August 5, 1956. © Motonaga Nakatsuji Etsuko, courtesy Motonaga Document Research Office.

11. Sadamasa Motonaga, *Work (Water)*, 1956 (new commission 2011). Polyethylene, water, dye, and rope, dimensions variable. Collection of Motonaga Nakatsuji Etsuko. Installation view at *Gutai: Splendid Playground*, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, February 15–May 8, 2013. © Motonaga Nakatsuji Etsuko. Photo by David Heald © Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York.
12. Photography of Atsuko Tanaka with *Work (Bells)* at the 3<sup>rd</sup> Genbi Exhibition at the Kyoto Municipal Museum of Art, November 1955. © Itō Ryōji.
13. Tanaka performing *Stage Clothes* at Gutai Art on the Stage, May 29, 1957, Sankei Kaikan, Osaka. Photograph © Itō Ryōji and the former members of the Gutai Art Association.
14. Tanaka performing *Stage Clothes* at Gutai Art on the Stage, May 29, 1957, Sankei Kaikan, Osaka. Photograph © Itō Ryōji and the former members of the Gutai Art Association.
15. Kazuo Shiraga, *Challenging Mud*, 1955 (2nd execution). © Shiraga Fujiko and the former members of Gutai Art Association. Image courtesy Ashiya City Museum of Art & History.
16. Saburō Murakami, *At One Moment Opening Six Holes* (1955). 1<sup>st</sup> Gutai Art Exhibition, Ōhara Kaikan hall, Tokyo, October 1955. © Murakami Makiko and Tomohiko, courtesy of the Museum of Osaka University
17. Kazuo Shiraga, *Ultramodern Sanbasō, 1957. Performance view of Gutai Art on the Stage, Sankei Kaikan, Osaka, May 29, 1957.* © Shiraga Hisao and the former members of the Gutai Art Association, courtesy Museum of Osaka University.
18. Installation view of *Electric Dress* at Gutai: Splendid Playground, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 2013. Photograph by Richard Perry and courtesy of the *New York Times*.

## Chapter 2

19. Photograph from *Apocalipopótese* performance, Atêrro do Flamengo, Rio de Janeiro, 1968. Image courtesy of Claudio Oiticica, Projeto Hélio Oiticica, Rio de Janeiro.
20. Photograph from *Apocalipopótese* performance, Atêrro do Flamengo, Rio de Janeiro, 1968. Image courtesy of Claudio Oiticica, Projeto Hélio Oiticica, Rio de Janeiro.
21. Photograph from *Apocalipopótese* performance, Atêrro do Flamengo, Rio de Janeiro, 1968. Image courtesy of Claudio Oiticica, Projeto Hélio Oiticica, Rio de Janeiro.

22. Hélio Oiticica, *P07 Parangolé Cape 04 'Clark,'* 1964-65. Paint, canvas, burlap, vinyl plastic. César and Claudio Oiticica Collection, Rio de Janeiro.
23. Hélio Oiticica, *Metaesquema No. 348*, 1958. Gouache on board. Museum of Modern Art.
24. Hélio Oiticica, *PNI Penetrable (PNI Penetrável)*, 1960. Cesar and Claudio Oiticica Collection, Rio de Janeiro.
25. Hélio Oiticica, *B11 Box Bólido 09*, 1964. Wood, glass and pigment. Tate Modern.
26. Lygia Clark, *Bicho (máquina)*, 1962. Gilded metal with hinges, dimensions variable Museum of Fine Arts Houston, The Adolpho Leirner Collection of Brazilian Constructive Art, Museum purchase funded by the Caroline Wiess Law Accessions Endowment Fund, 2005.470.
27. Hélio Oiticica, *Parangolé, P4 Cape 1*, 1964. Photograph by Sergio Zalis.
28. Installation view of Hélio Oiticica, *Tropicália*, 1966-67. Plants, sand, birds, poems by Roberta Camila Salgado on bricks, tiles and vinyl squares. Collection of César and Claudio Oiticica. Photograph by Matt Casarella.
29. Installation view of *P11 Parangolé Cape 7, Sex and Violence, That's What I Like (P11 Parangolé capa 7, Sexo é violência, e isso que me agrada)*, 1966. Cloth, gauze, and paint. Installation view at *Hélio Oiticica: To Organize Delirium*, Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh. Private collection, London.
30. Installation view of *P20 Parangolé Cape 16, Guevarcália (P20 Parangolé capa 16, Guevarcália)*, 1968. Fabric, sequins, and silkscreen on fabric. Installation view at *Hélio Oiticica: To Organize Delirium*, Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh. César and Claudio Oiticica, Rio de Janeiro.
31. Installation view, *Hélio Oiticica: To Organize Delirium*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.
32. Detail of garments from gift shop, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

### Chapter 3

33. Robert Kushner, *Robert Kushner and Friends Eat Their Clothes*, 1972. Greene Street Loft, New York. Photograph courtesy of Robert Kushner.
34. Robert Kushner, *Pineapple Falsies with Fruit Mini*, from *Robert Kushner and Friends Eat Their Clothes*, 1972. Pineapple, apple, pink grapefruit, fennel. Greene Street Loft, New York. Photograph courtesy of Robert Kushner.



35. Robert Kushner, *Tongue Necklace*, from *Robert Kushner and Friends Eat Their Clothes* 1972. Calves tongue, pita, escarole, spinach, knife. Greene Street Loft, New York. Photograph courtesy of Robert Kushner.
36. Robert Kushner, *Robert Kushner and Friends Eat Their Clothes* 1972. Greene Street Loft, New York. Photograph courtesy of Robert Kushner.
37. Robert Kushner, *Costumes for Moving Bodies*, 1971. Mandeville Art Gallery, University of California San Diego. Photograph courtesy of Robert Kushner.
38. Robert Kushner, *Costumes Constructed and Eaten*, Rehearsal, 1972. Arcadia, California. Photograph courtesy of Robert Kushner.
39. Robert Kushner, *Costumes Constructed and Eaten*, 1972. Jack Glenn Gallery, Corona del Mar, California. Photograph courtesy of Robert Kushner.
40. Robert Kushner, *Costumes Constructed and Eaten*, 1972. Jack Glenn Gallery, Corona del Mar, California. Photograph courtesy of Robert Kushner.
41. Robert Kushner, *Costumes Constructed and Eaten*, 1972. Jack Glenn Gallery, Corona del Mar, California. Photograph courtesy of Robert Kushner.
42. Robert Kushner, *Banana Bandolier*, from *Robert Kushner and Friends Eat Their Clothes* 1972. Banana, cranberry, celery, grapes. Greene Street Loft, New York. Photograph courtesy of Robert Kushner.
43. Robert Kushner, *Asparagus Vest*, 1973. Asparagus, Italian salami, radishes, parsley, scallions, string. Photograph by Susan Meiselas.
44. *Pretzel Décolleté*, 1972 (reconstructed 1994). Pretzels, Cheez Doodles, collard greens, string. Photograph by Stanley Stellar.
45. *Hot Dog Apron*, 1972 (reconstructed 1994). Hot dogs, Vienna sausage, red pepper, hot peppers, cherry tomatoes, thyme, radishes, string and grosgrain ribbon. Photograph by Stanley Stellar.
46. Daniel Spoerri, *29 Variations on a Meal*, 1964. Invitation card, Allan Stone Gallery, New York. Image courtesy of Museum of Modern Art.
47. Tina Girouard, Carol Goodden, and Gordon Matta-Clark in front of the space that would become *FOOD*, 1971. 127 Prince Street, New York. Photograph by Richard Landry.
48. View of the kitchen at *FOOD*, c. 1972. 127 Prince Street, New York. Photograph by Carol Goodden.

## Epilogue

49. Lygia Clark, *Máscaras Sensoriais (Sensorial Masks)*, 1967. Fabric masks of various colors and odors. Image courtesy of the Alvaro Clark Collection, Brazil.
50. Rebecca Horn, *Finger Gloves (Fingerhandschuhe)*, 1972. Fabric and balsa wood. Tate collection.
51. Photograph of *Finger Gloves* from Horn's film *Performances II*, 1973.
52. Stelarc, *Third Hand*, 1980. Aluminum, stainless steel, acrylic, latex electronics, electrodes, cables and battery pack. Image courtesy of the artist.
53. Ann Hamilton, *suitably positioned (toothpick suit)*, from the *body object series*, 1984. Black and white photograph published in 1991 by Louver Gallery, New York. Photograph by Bob McMurtry.
54. Noriko Yamaguchi, *Ketai Girl Suit*, 2004. Mixed media suit with electronic components. Image courtesy of the artist.
55. Lee Bul, *Cravings*, 1989. Outdoor performance in Jang Heung, Korea. Image courtesy of Studio Lee Bul.
56. Lee Bul, *Sorry for Suffering—You Think I'm a Puppy on a Picnic?*, 1990. Twelve-day performance at Gimpo airport, Seoul; Narita airport, Chiba; downtown Tokyo; and Dokiwaza Theater, Tokyo. Image courtesy of Studio Lee Bul.
57. Lara Schnitger, *Suffragette City*, 2017. Performance in Dresden, Germany. Image courtesy of the artist and Anton Kern Gallery, New York. Photograph by Swen Rudolph.
58. Robin Lasser and Adrienne Pao, *Edible Garden Dress Tent*, 2011. Montalvo Arts Center, Saratoga, CA.
59. Donna Huanca, *Obsidian Ladder*, 2019. Installation view at Marciano Art Foundation, Los Angeles. Image courtesy of the artist, Marciano Art Foundation, Los Angeles and Peres Projects, Berlin. Photograph by Joshua White/JWPictures.com.
60. Jeffrey Gibson, *People Like Us*, 2019. Installation view of the Whitney Biennial 2019, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, May 17 – September 22, 2019. Photograph by Ron Amstutz
61. Jeffrey Gibson, *Mx. Oops and Xavier*, 2018. Digital photograph, dimensions variable. Image courtesy of the artist, Sikkema Jenkins & Co., Kavi Gupta, and Roberts Projects.
62. Raúl de Nieves, Installation view of *Raúl de Nieves: Fina*, Cleveland Museum of Art at Transformer Station, Cleveland, Ohio. Image courtesy of the Cleveland Museum of Art.

63. Photograph of Raúl de Nieves' shoes in *Harper's Bazaar*, August 5, 2013. Photograph by Karl Lagerfeld.
64. Photograph of Raúl de Nieves' shoes in *W Magazine*, March 1, 2013. Photograph by Mario Sorrenti.
65. Nick Cave, *Soundsuit*, 2011. Found objects, metal armature, knit head and bodysuit, and mannequin, 10' 1" x 42" x 33." Museum of Modern Art, New York. Image courtesy of Nick Cave and the Museum of Modern Art.
66. Nick Cave, *HEARD•AKRON*, 2019. Performance at Akron Art Museum, April 28, 2019, Akron, Ohio. Photograph by Samantha Lyons.
67. Pia Camil, *Wearing – Watching*, 2015. 800 ponchos made from second hand fabrics. Commissioned and produced by Frieze Art Inc for Frieze Projects, New York. Photograph by Timothy Schenck. Image courtesy Frieze Art Inc.
68. Rirkrit Tiravanija, *Untitled (Free)*, 1992. Performed at the 303 Gallery, New York. Refrigerator, table, chairs, wood, drywall, food and other materials. Dimensions variable.
69. Charlotte Kruk, *M&Matador*, c. 2010. M&M wrappers, sequins, fabric, plastic. Image courtesy of the artist.
70. Andy Warhol, *The Souper Dress*, c. 1967. Paper (cellulose and cotton), screen printed. Image courtesy of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.
71. Jana Sterbak, *Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic*, 1987. Hand-stitched beef. Image courtesy of Walker Art Center, Minneapolis.

## Introduction

In his seminal phenomenological essay “Eye and Mind” (1961), Maurice Merleau-Ponty described his experience of the world in the following terms: “Visible and mobile, my body is a thing among things; it’s caught in the fabric of the world, and its cohesion is that of a thing. But, because it moves itself and sees, it holds things in a circle around itself.”<sup>1</sup> Merleau-Ponty’s evocative passage uses fabric as a metaphor for the interwoven relationship between our bodies and the environment, enabled by our entire sensory engagement with the world. For Merleau-Ponty, whose writings would become foundational for postwar artists exploring the changing relationship between the object and observer, the viewer is no longer a passive participant who simply observes, but a perceiving, embodied subject enmeshed in the material of the world. While Merleau-Ponty uses the term metaphorically to describe the connective substance between bodies and spaces, this dissertation takes up the literal fabric that surrounds those bodies and explores its potential for social connection through multisensory experience.

Influenced by Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological engagement with the sensing body and inspired by the growing presence of wearable art in museums today, this study explores the interrelationships between clothing, community, and the senses in postwar performance practices. While the field of contemporary art now includes many artists whose creative pursuits foreground participatory and multisensory experiences, three foundational artists in the early postwar decades emerge for their sensory approach towards wearable art. The chapters that follow take up the significance of clothing and the senses in the performance-based practices of Atsuko Tanaka (Japanese, 1932-2005), Hélio Oiticica (Brazilian, 1937-1980) and Robert

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<sup>1</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind,” in *The Primacy of Perception*, ed. James E. Edie and trans. Carleton Dallery (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 163. Originally published as “L’Oeil et l’esprit,” *Art de France* 1, no. 1 (January 1961).

Kushner (American, b. 1949), who each occupy a special position within the development of performance and body art for their focus on the sensorial and interactive properties of clothing-like objects. Key performances by each artist, including Tanaka's *Electric Dress* (1956), Oiticica's *Parangolé* series (1964-1968), and Kushner's *Robert Kushner and Friends Eat Their Clothes* (1972) will be analyzed in each chapter and situated within the then-burgeoning arena of international performance art (figs. 1-4). Atsuko Tanaka, an active member of the experimental postwar Japanese Gutai group, first wore her optically spectacular *Electric Dress* at the Second Gutai Art Exhibition in Tokyo in 1956. Tanaka's garment, composed of 200 blinking lights, stimulated a powerful visual and physical experience for its initial postwar Japanese audience through its activation of light, heat, and color. Hélio Oiticica's *Parangolé* works, composed of more than thirty cape-like forms, were made after his involvement in the Brazilian Neo-Concrete movement (1959-61). Samba dancers set these colorful garments in motion in public spaces of Rio de Janeiro, animating the garments through touch and movement. In American artist Robert Kushner's *Robert Kushner and Friends Eat Their Clothes* (1972), presented in New York's Greene Street Loft, taste and smell became the primary sensations experienced by participants, as the artist invited audience members to share in eating his edible garments after performers modeled them in a fashion show format. Drawing upon these performances as important case studies, this study considers how each artist mobilizes the language of clothing to create material, social, and artistic sites for collective experience, expanding clothing beyond a form that typically contains and defines the individual body.

In order to more fully understand the sensory approach Tanaka, Oiticica and Kushner adopt towards clothing, I propose the new term of synaesthetic dress, an interpretive concept used to characterize and study the wearable, multi-sensory and participatory forms in these

artists' diverse practices. The radical potential of synesthesia—the involuntary stimulation of one sense triggered by another—serves as the conceptual origin of this term.<sup>2</sup> My formation of synaesthetic dress departs from the strict definition of synesthesia as a neurological condition and looks to the Greek origins of the word: syn (“together”) and aisthesis (“sensation” or “perception”).<sup>3</sup> This approach emphasizes the importance of multi-sensory experience across multiple bodies, including those of the wearer and viewer-participant. While true synaesthesia involves a perceptual experience not actually carried by that particular stimulus (i.e. visualizing colors while hearing sounds, as famously experienced by Kandinsky), this study uses synaesthesia as an interpretive concept for considering the interrelationships between multiple senses—sight, touch, taste, smell and sound—and the bodies that perceive them.

My research builds on an existing body of sensory studies scholarship that has grown in the humanities since the early 1990s. The so-called “sensory turn” that first appeared in the field of anthropology has since formed an interdisciplinary field encompassing art, history, sociology, philosophy, psychology and geography.<sup>4</sup> While the discipline of art history has long privileged the visual in experiencing and evaluating works of art, scholars have increasingly explored a more embodied understanding of art across cultures and eras.<sup>5</sup> Such an approach challenges the

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<sup>2</sup> Richard E. Cytowic, “Synesthesia: Phenomenology and Neuropsychology,” *Psyche* 2, no. 10 (July 1995), <http://psyche.csse.monash.edu.au/v2/psyche-2-10-cytowic.html>.

<sup>3</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s. v. “Synaesthesia,” accessed April 14, 2015, <http://www.oed.com.www2.lib.ku.edu/view/Entry/196336?redirectedFrom=synesthesia>.

<sup>4</sup> For an overview on the emergence of sensory studies, see David Howes, “Charting the Sensorial Revolution,” *Senses and Society* 1, no. 1 (2006): 113-128 and “Coming to Our Senses: The Sensual Turn in Anthropological Understanding,” in *Sensual Relations: Engaging the Senses in Culture and Social Theory* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 3-58.

<sup>5</sup> Key texts that discuss sensory studies in the field of art history include Caroline Jones, ed. *Sensorium: Embodied Experience, Technology, and Contemporary Art* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006); Patrizia Di Bello and Gabriel Koureas, eds., *Art, History, and the Senses: 1830 to the Present* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2010); Francesca Bacci and David Melcher, eds. *Art and the Senses* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) and Constance Classen, *The Museum of the Senses: Experiencing Art and Collections* (London: Bloombury Academic, 2017). For an excellent discussion of

primacy of sight at the expense of other senses and also questions the intellectual detachment of observers, whose distance separates them from what they see and feel. This project foregrounds the importance of embodied experience in performance practices and contributes to an exciting and evolving body of art historical scholarship that addresses the entire human sensorium in aesthetic encounters.

A theoretical concept of synaesthetics has recently been formulated and applied to twenty-first century performance art by the British scholar Josephine Machon. In her book *(Syn)-aesthetics: Redefining Visceral Performance* (2009), Machon uses the term (syn)aesthetics to provide a new mode of performance analysis that defines and appreciates the visceral experience of performance immediately felt in the body of the viewer. Divided into two parts, her study first surveys a broad range of theoretical writings on performance before interviewing a number of contemporary artists on their practices. While a brief section of her book, titled “(Syn)aesthetics in Practice” outlines strategies that characterize her concept of (syn)aesthetic performance, her theory is not directly applied to the artists she interviews later, leaving her analysis largely abstract and untethered to individual works. While some of the methodologies and theories presented in Machon’s book, including the phenomenological writings of Merleau-Ponty and the ideas of performance theorist Peggy Phelan, will feature in each chapter, my study more fully grounds Tanaka, Oiticica and Kushner’s engagement with the senses within the historical, social and political conditions of each artist’s time and place. A key premise of this study contends that just like works of art, the senses are historically and culturally bound, and, in the words of André

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art history’s reckoning with “the sensory turn,” see Jenni Laurens, “Welcome to the Revolution: The Sensory Turn in Art History,” *Journal of Art Historiography* 7 (December 2012): 1-17. Other key avenues for sensory scholarship include the academic journal *Senses and Society* and the *Sensory Formations* series published by Berg. For theoretical discussions of the senses, see Laura U. Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002) and Mark Paterson, *The Sense of Touch: Haptics, Affects, and Technologies* (New York: Berg, 2007).

Lepecki and Sally Banes, “constantly being activated and repressed, reinvented and reproduced, rehearsed and improvised.”<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, the following chapters acknowledge the historical and cultural significance of each artist’s local environment, including Tokyo and Osaka in the 1950s, Rio de Janeiro in the 1960s, and New York in the 1970s, respectively, as central to understanding the performances’ full range of possible meanings.

To frame the sensory impact of the performances in their original contexts, each chapter will consider the “afterlife” of these artworks in the form of their reconstructions as objects and recreations as performances. Central to this discussion will be the writings of theorist Peggy Phelan, who notably observed in *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (1993) that “performance’s only life is in the present.”<sup>7</sup> Phelan’s writing underscores the time- and place-specific nature of performance art, which emerged as an international tendency in avant-garde art in the postwar years. For Phelan, the ephemeral, non-reproductive quality of performance lends a greater sense of political potential to the creative process. While this study relies primarily on performance documentation from photographic, textual, oral and film sources to understand each work in its original setting, it also acknowledges the limits of these documentary traces to overcome the historical and cultural distance of twenty-first century viewers. Accordingly, this study does not attempt to reconstruct an unmediated or “pure” relationship with performance in its original form, a modernist notion that has been persuasively challenged by performance theorist Amelia Jones, although it does seek to better understand the kinds of knowledge one might gain from a phenomenological experience of live performances, as explored through its

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<sup>6</sup> André Lepecki and Sally Banes, “Introduction: The Performance of the Senses,” in *The Senses in Performance*, edited by André Lepecki and Sally Banes (New York: Routledge, 2007), 1.

<sup>7</sup> Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993), 146.



extant documentation.<sup>8</sup> Following a discussion of these works in the context of their original creation and reception, each chapter will discuss the possibilities and limitations of these objects as they are displayed and experienced today.

Another goal of this project is to revisit the work of these artists in light of recent writings on relational aesthetics, a term initially proposed by the French curator and critic Nicolas Bourriaud. In *Relational Aesthetics*, Bourriaud used the term to describe an emerging body of participatory artworks in the 1990s and early 2000s, characterized as “an art taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and private symbolic space.”<sup>9</sup> In Bourriaud’s discussion, the participatory projects of artists like Rirkrit Tiravanija, Robert Barry and Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster transformed passive spectators into active contributors and producers of a shared social experience.<sup>10</sup> Since his inaugural writing on the subject, several scholars have critiqued Bourriaud’s optimistic take on socially engaged art. Notably, British scholar Claire Bishop has challenged the nature of the social relations established under relational art’s premises. Paraphrasing Bourriaud’s words, Bishop writes in her recent book *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, “Beginning from [Bourriaud’s] premise, participatory art aims to restore and realize a communal, collective space of shared social engagement,” and that

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<sup>8</sup> In several of her writings, Amelia Jones posits that there is no unmediated relationship between viewers and any kind of cultural form, including performance art. Therefore, seeing a live performance should not be privileged over reading a performance through its film and photographic documentation, as both are equally intersubjective. For more on this topic, see Amelia Jones, “‘Presence’ in Absentia: Experiencing Performance as Documentation,” *Art Journal* 56, no. 4 (Winter 1997): 11-18.

<sup>9</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 2002), 14.

<sup>10</sup> Bourriaud, 15.

it aspires to “repair a broken social bond.”<sup>11</sup> Bishop, however, identifies a number of artists working with interactive projects who enact more aggressive approaches to the audience, what she coins “relational antagonism,” to illuminate social and political inequalities in their participatory projects rather than smoothing them over.<sup>12</sup>

In response to recent discussions of participatory art, this project attempts to underscore the art historical significance of Tanaka, Oiticica and Kushner, whose strategies for sensory engagement and interactivity occurred long before the focal decade of Bourriaud’s text. These artists’ works offer important early precedents for the tendencies described within the relational aesthetic framework and, as the epilogue suggests, demonstrate a continuing relevance for contemporary artists today. Extending Bishop’s line of inquiry, my study also considers the potential conflicts and disturbances engendered by each artist’s work. Just as synaesthesia does not necessarily imply a harmonious relationship between diverse sensations, this study does not propose a wholly socially harmonious relationship between bodies and forms. In my formulation of the term, synaesthetic dress becomes a concept used to explore connections as well as tensions between bodies and the social fabric.

The dissertation’s three main chapters will progress chronologically and geographically with an analysis of select works by each individual artist. Chapter 1 traces the evolution of Atsuko Tanaka’s clothing-based works and her exploration of sensory experience as a central theme for audience engagement, culminating in her 1956 performance of *Electric Dress*. By drawing upon historical studies and contemporary writings by Tanaka and her fellow Gutai artists, I situate the multisensory elements of Tanaka’s performance—the intensely colored light,

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<sup>11</sup> Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso Books, 2012), 275.

<sup>12</sup> See Bishop’s “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,” *October* 110 (Autumn 2004): 51-79.

heat and sound of the garment's electrical components and the fragility of its materials—in the context of Japan's post-atomic, post-Occupation era. Central to this discussion of Tanaka's performance is a focus on postwar memory and critical discussions of trauma. However, I argue that the sensory qualities of Tanaka's work are not limited to a reading of trauma exclusively; rather, the artist's emphasis on color and light generates a sublime effect, enacting dual expressions of the body that oscillate between traumatic and ecstatic.

Chapter 2 considers the interrelationships between audience participation, sensory experience and political engagement in Hélio Oiticica's *Parangolés*, a series of colorful wearable objects created in 1964 and first performed the following year. This chapter first grounds Oiticica's *parangolés* within relevant artistic and historical contexts, including his increasingly participatory practices following his involvement with the Neo-Concrete movement, as well as the development of the *parangolé* within the repressive political environment of 1960s Brazil. This chapter highlights the cultural, historical and sensorial significance of samba within Oiticica's *Opinião 65* performance at Rio de Janeiro's Museu de Arte Moderna, which prominently featured samba dancers from the Mangueira Hill favela, who wore the *parangolés* and activated them through dance and movement. While Oiticica considered the *parangolés* as a unifying symbol, a "synthesis" of Brazilian bodies, materials, spaces and sensations, this chapter questions the unifying implications of this term as it relates to the cultural form of samba in order to better understand the complex and ambivalent expressions of resistance that emerged during the *Opinião 65* performance.

Chapter 3 explores the unconventional gustatory experience of clothing in Robert Kushner's *Robert Kushner and Friends Eat Their Clothes* (1972). This chapter contextualizes Kushner's performance within participatory food-based artistic practices of the 1960s and 1970s,

paying particular attention to the influence of FOOD restaurant in New York's SoHo neighborhood. Drawing upon sociological and philosophical discussions of taste, this chapter further connects Kushner's edible performances with the growing presence of counter-cultural, youth-based sensual practices in 1960s American art and culture. Following my discussion of Kushner, the epilogue traces the continued relevance of Tanaka, Oiticica and Kushner to more recent artists who have incorporated participatory strategies and sensory experience into their wearable art practices.

Clothing functions as the primary interface between the body and the surrounding environment, and as such, it is central to our embodied experience of the world. The concept of synaesthetic dress offered here provides a useful reframing of clothing's utilitarian form by exploring its potential to engage with different realms of sensory experience and generate new perceptions of its material form. Counter to traditional interpretations of clothing that tend to view it as a marker or relic of the artist's body, or as a material that can construct, perform, or contest various identities, this study proposes to see—or rather—sense clothing in a new light, through the thought-provoking performances of artists who foreground the multisensory experience of their audiences and participants.<sup>13</sup> Such an approach extends beyond conventional

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<sup>13</sup> Art historians Anne Hollander and Amelia Jones in particular have offered significant insights on how clothing can reference the body and shape perceptions of identity in painting and performance, respectively. See Anne Hollander, *Seeing Through Clothes* (New York: Viking Press, 1978) and *Fabric and Vision: Dress and Drapery in Painting* (London: National Gallery, 2002). See Amelia Jones, "'The Clothes Make the Man': The Male Artist as a Performative Function," *Oxford Art Journal* 18, no. 2 (1995): 18-32, and "Dis/playing the Phallus: Male Artists Perform Their Masculinities," *Art History* 17, no. 4 (Dec. 1994): 546-584. For references to the absence of the female body in western art history and female artists' response through clothing, see Amelia Jones, "'Presence' and Calculated Absence," *Tema Celeste* 39 (Winter 1993): 38-41. Numerous exhibitions have also examined the influential role of clothing and fashion in an art context. See Nina Felshin's catalogue *Empty Dress: Clothing as Surrogate in Recent Art* (New York: Independent Curators Incorporated, 1993), which features artworks by Joseph Beuys, Lesley Dill, Robert Gober, Mary Kelly, Barbara Kruger, Annette Messager, and other American and European artists. See also Melissa Leventon's *Art Wear: Fashion and Anti-Fashion* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2005). A more recent exhibition on the subject is the Tramway Art Center's "Costume: Written Clothing," exhibited in Glasgow, Scotland between May 3-June 16, 2013. See Susanna Thompson's review "Costume: Written Clothing," *Art Review* 64, no. 6 (Sept. 2013): 151.

visual studies of clothing and instead highlights the significance of the body and the experience of participants in each performance.

As is the nature of case studies, this project does not provide a comprehensive account of all artists who have creatively engaged with sensorial clothing (although the epilogue does offer a partial survey of this terrain). However, this study does intentionally include three artists who represent a culturally and geographically diverse group with compellingly like-minded approaches to their wearable art. In keeping with current art historical scholarship, this project shares an interest in narrating a global perspective that seeks connections between artists operating in vital artistic centers around the world, thereby offering a trans-continental, trans-hemispheric scope. Significantly, two of the case studies explore early examples of performance art that emerged not in the United States, but in Japan and Brazil. Countering the postwar narrative that assumes a center vs. periphery model, wherein major artistic tendencies began in New York and worked their way around the world, this study considers the importance of each artist's cultural surroundings and locales, without subsuming them in a Eurocentric narrative. The benefits of such an approach include a broader understanding of artistic trends in the postwar period and a greater awareness of shared affinities that cross national and cultural borders.

By analyzing the works of Tanaka, Oiticica and Kushner, three significant artists who have not previously been discussed substantially together, I aim to expand the interpretive possibilities of clothing and add to the growing body of scholarship on international performance tendencies in the postwar period.<sup>14</sup> To return to Merleau-Ponty's imaginative phrasing, these

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<sup>14</sup> The exception being Tanaka and Oiticica, who are briefly compared in a few art historical publications. Pedro Erber describes Oiticica's and Tanaka's mutual interest in "the act of wearing art and the relationship among color, movement, and the human body" in *Breaching the Frame: The Rise of Contemporary Art in Brazil and Japan* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), 12. Yuko Hasegawa provides a slightly more extended comparison

artists' creative activation of the senses opens up a new perspective on clothing as a connective material that interweaves the fabric of the body with the fabric of the world.

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between Oiticica and Tanaka in her essay "Network Paintings, Prophecies of the Present," in *Atsuko Tanaka: The Art of Connecting* (Birmingham, UK: Ikon Gallery, 2011), 13-14.

## Ch. 1: The Shock of Sight: Envisioning Atsuko Tanaka's *Electric Dress*

*What interested me most during the production was an unusual beauty created by the light bulbs on the dresses. It was a beauty that could not be made by human hands.*

– Atsuko Tanaka, “Stage Dress”

*Since somebody had to wear it, I covered myself with vinyl and put the electric dress on. The moment Mr. Sannomiya said, “I am turning the electricity on,” I had the fleeting thought: Is this how a death-row inmate would feel like?*

– Atsuko Tanaka, “When I Make My Work”

Atsuko Tanaka, a key member of the postwar Gutai group, first wore her optically spectacular *Electric Dress* at the Second Gutai Art Exhibition in 1956.<sup>15</sup> Her performance would become one of the most iconic and celebrated moments in the eighteen-year span of Gutai, an influential avant-garde collective of Japanese artists whose interests encompassed painting, performance, installation, and staged theatrical events. Audience members witnessed Tanaka emerge on stage of Tokyo's Ōhara Kaikan Hall in an oversized dress-like ensemble composed of dazzling incandescent multi-colored lights of varying shape and size. Engineered to flash at irregular yet increasingly fast intervals through a noisy electrical motor system, the dress alternated between brief moments of darkness and excessively bright light, culminating in a powerful visual and aural experience that the artist characterized as “incessant” and “chaotic.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> The following chapter will use the most common English translation of the name of Tanaka's performance, *Electric Dress*, although some variation exists in the translation of this title. Namiko Kunimoto notes that the work was first described by Gutai founder Jirō Yoshihara as “clothes created by lightbulbs,” and then later became associated with the Japanese title *denkifuku*, or *Electric Dress*. The first two characters, *denki*, mean “electric,” while the last character, *fuku*, translates directly as “clothes.” In one of the first surveys of Tanaka's work, curator Mizuho Kato used the title *Electric Clothes* for its “broader connotations, which more accurately reflect the Japanese word *fuku*.” The gendered implications of “dress” versus “clothes” have emerged in discussions of Tanaka's work, however, the term can also be used as a gender-neutral one, to describe clothing in general, rather than a garment typically associated with women's wear. See Namiko Kunimoto, “Tanaka Atsuko's *Electric Dress* and the Circuits of Subjectivity,” *Art Bulletin* 95, no. 3 (September 2013): 481 and Mizuho Kato, “Searching for a Boundary,” in *Atsuko Tanaka: Search for an Unknown Aesthetic, 1954-2000*, trans. Simon Scanes and Keiko Shiraha (Ashiya: Ashiya City Museum of Art and History, 2001), 25.

<sup>16</sup> Tanaka, “Work 11: Stage Dress, 1957,” in *Electrifying Art: Atsuko Tanaka, 1954-1968*, ed. Mizuho Kato and Ming Tiampo (Vancouver: Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, 2004), 102.

Although there are no extant moving images of the performance, two widely circulated photographs offer an opportunity to speculate how audience members might have experienced this event and the visual precariousness of Tanaka's creation.

In the first image, Tanaka appears in an unlit version of *Electric Dress* (fig. 1). A mass of layered light bulbs forms a pyramidal-shaped garment that covers nearly the entirety of her body. The outfit features light bulbs of different sizes and shapes, some long and cylindrical, others short and round, each colored with bright resin enamel paints in multiple colors—red, blue, yellow, and green. Although most of her body remains hidden, Tanaka's face appears at the top of the sculpture's pyramidal form, as well as a hand and a small section of the black vinyl bodysuit worn by the artist underneath the suit to protect her skin, offering a small but important glimpse of a human body underneath its technological encasement. The wiring from the light bulbs tangles and pools at Tanaka's feet as she stands still in the image; her gaze projects out of the photograph's limits towards the audience who, at this particular moment in the performance, could presumably observe these visual details.

But what did Tanaka's audience see next, once the lights became activated? The second image offers a more challenging scene to decipher (fig. 2). The intensity of the lights overshadows much of the garment's discrete parts. No longer do the light bulbs stand out as individual components. Rather they appear nearly indistinguishable from each other in the central trunk of the garment. Tanaka's face, while still visible, becomes less defined with the saturating colored light. The supporting structure of the artist's body, too, becomes less apparent. Although the garment flares on either side of Tanaka's body, one can no longer make out the arms or hands underneath. Without a clear connection to an underlying human form in the lower half of the piece, the dress appears more solid and machine-like. The lights effectively redirect



one's attention away from the body towards the garment's glimmering surface. Adding to the image's visual confusion, Tanaka stands in front of twenty drawings inspired by the garment she wears. Their shapes echo the wires, bulbs, and circuits of the dress, further dissolving the boundary between the garment being performed on the stage and the two-dimensional artworks in the background.

The distinct visual experiences of these two moments in the performance characterize the transitory nature of the piece. Intended to be in a state of constant flux, the artist's body and the sculptural garment in *Electric Dress* oscillate between visibility and invisibility, exposed and obscured, darkness and excessive light. This excess of light and color creates a central contradiction at the heart of the performance. When the lights are off, one sees more clearly. When the lights are on, one sees less clearly, and also differently. The conditions of this second visual encounter generate additional sensory experiences, defined not only by sight, but also by the heat of the electric bulbs and sound of the garment's motor. *Electric Dress* is a work that at once foregrounds the sensory experience of vision, yet the work's physical, even visceral relationship to the body—of both the artist and the audience—is central to the performance as a whole. As Yuko Hasegawa observes, *Electric Dress* produces a “physical syntony or ecstasy, the sensation of which is like the flow of blood coursing through our bodies and accelerating.”<sup>17</sup>

Tanaka's quotes at the beginning of this chapter reflect on both the beauty and the danger inherent in her electric garment, particularly her fear of being electrocuted. The potential risk in Tanaka's work extended to others as well. In his 1963 writing “On Atsuko Tanaka,” Gutai's leader Jirō Yoshihara would comment on the artist's projects in the following terms: “Tanaka's dangerous projects often terrorized us,” continuing that “at the first ‘stage’ exhibition, three men

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<sup>17</sup> Yuko Hasegawa, “Network Paintings, Prophecies of the Present,” in *Atsuko Tanaka: The Art of Connecting* (Birmingham, UK: Ikon Gallery, 2011), 13.

volunteered, risking electrocution, to wear three dresses with thousands of blinking electric light bulbs.”<sup>18</sup> The threat of electrocution continues in present-day interpretations of the work. As one critic has written, “it is impossible to look at the outfit and not fear the terror of electrocution.”<sup>19</sup> Yet just as importantly, the work’s incorporation of bright colors through the painted light bulbs and mesmerizing illumination adds to the garment’s expressive effect. The dress is not just shocking, but beautiful too.

*Electric Dress* stimulated a powerful visual and physical experience for its initial postwar audience, who were just a decade removed from the atomic bombings. Part of this chapter seeks to trace the psychological effects of the war and Japan’s subsequent seven-year occupation by American forces (1945-1952) through Tanaka’s engagement with wartime visuals. World War II and the occupation years marked a key period of transformation and violence in the country. The enforced nature of an authoritative Western presence further accelerated shifts in internal and external power relations already initiated by the atomic bombing. In light of these conditions, this chapter will further explore the optical and physical encounters of *Electric Dress* as they relate to postwar memory and trauma.

This chapter seeks to examine the physical—even neurological—response initiated by the *Electric Dress* performance as it relates to discussions of wartime and postwar trauma. As Akira Mizuta Lippit remarks in *Atomic Light (Shadow Optics)*, “The atomic radiation that ended the war in Japan unleashed an excess of visibility that threatened the material and conceptual dimensions of human interiority and exteriority.”<sup>20</sup> The excess of visibility Lippit invokes to

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<sup>18</sup> Jirō Yoshihara, “On Atsuko Tanaka, 1963” in *Electrifying Art*, 110. Originally published as “Tanaka Atsuko ni tsuite,” *A. Tanaka*, exhibition brochure, Gutai Pinacotheca, Osaka (February 1963).

<sup>19</sup> Katie Stone, “Electrifying Art: Atsuko Tanaka 1954-1968,” *Brooklyn Rail*, October 1, 2004, <https://brooklynrail.org/2004/10/artseen/electrifying-art-atsuko-tanaka-1954>.

<sup>20</sup> Akira Mizuta Lippit, *Atomic Light (Shadow Optics)* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 4.

characterize the atomic bomb resonates with one facet of the multisensory experience of Tanaka's performance. The intense light of the garment, as well as the heat generated by its electric surface, the jarring mechanical sound of its motor, and the fragility of its materials further signal a potent representation of the atomic bomb and trauma associated with postwar experience. However, the formal elements and sensory qualities of Tanaka's work are not limited to a reading of trauma exclusively; they also produce a sublime effect, what the artist would characterize as "a beauty that could not be made by human hands" through their expressive effects of light and color. Accordingly, I argue that Tanaka's garment enacted dual expressions of both trauma and ecstasy, both of which would have profound significance to postwar audiences.

Current scholarship has challenged the notion that postwar artists were fully "released from the ruins of history," as curator Alexandra Munroe has phrased it, with art historians seeking to explore the impact of war and Occupation on postwar artists' visual representations.<sup>21</sup> Contemporary scholars have since reevaluated previous arguments regarding Gutai's apolitical stance, as typified by Shinichiro Osaki's statement that Gutai artworks "never contained any social criticism or political implications: they were performed purely to make aesthetic statements."<sup>22</sup> Such claims echo Tanaka's own repeated denials of any social or gender-related intent in her work.<sup>23</sup> Offering an alternative contextual reading of Tanaka's art not limited by the artist's stated intentions, this study acknowledges both critical positions of past and present

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<sup>21</sup> Alexandra Munroe, *Japanese Art after 1945: Scream Against the Sky* (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1994), 186

<sup>22</sup> Shinichiro Osaki, "Body and Place: Action in Postwar Art in Japan," in *Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object, 1949-1979*, ed. Paul Schimmel (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1998), 139.

<sup>23</sup> Namiko Kunimoto, "Tanaka Atsuko's *Electric Dress* and the Circuits of Subjectivity," 466. Kunimoto cites the following statement given by Tanaka at a symposium at the University of California at Los Angeles on February 8, 1998: "My works have nothing to do with politics. . . . neither do they have anything to do with gender. It doesn't matter whether I am a man or a woman," 481.

scholars by considering Tanaka's work as both deeply political and deeply beautiful, in an effort to understand how the visual beauty of her work might have augmented postwar viewers' engagement with wartime representations.

Following a discussion of relevant contemporary scholarship on Tanaka's *Electric Dress*, I begin by tracing the evolution of Tanaka's clothing-based works, her engagement with sensory experience as a central theme for audience engagement, and her repeated use of expressive color, culminating in the 1956 performance of *Electric Dress*. Tanaka's performance will be explored within various contexts—social, psychological, and historical—to better understand its reception by audiences in Japan's post-atomic, post-Occupation era.<sup>24</sup> This chapter concludes by examining how museums present Tanaka's reconstructed work today, paying particular attention to their possibilities and limitations for sensory experience.

### **Critical Interpretations of *Electric Dress***

In his catalogue essay for the influential exhibition *Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object, 1949-1979* at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, Paul Schimmel calls Tanaka's *Electric Dress* “one of the most richly metaphorical works by a Gutai artist.”<sup>25</sup> Indeed, the strikingly evocative performance is rich with interpretive possibilities that many scholars have explored. Since its original performance in 1956, Tanaka's *Electric Dress* has been dismantled, reconstructed and displayed in numerous exhibitions around the world, and her work has inspired diverse interpretations. Poetry has even been written about Tanaka's electric

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<sup>24</sup> For an art historical contextualization of this period, see Donald Richie, “The Occupied Arts,” in *Confusion Era: Art and Culture of Japan during the Allied Occupation, 1945-1952*, ed. Mark Howard Sandler (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997), 11-21. Yoshikuni Igarashi's influential historical narrative of postwar national and gender relations between Japan and the United States can be found in *Bodies of Memory: Narratives of War in Postwar Japanese Culture, 1945-1970* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

<sup>25</sup> Paul Schimmel, “Leap into the Void: Performance and the Object,” in *Out of Actions*, 28.

garment, including B.K. Fischer's "Electric Dress," in which she beckons readers to "stare before it shorts out, trips and fizzes dim, before the clattery glass can cross the room and cool—a belle, a bride in bulbs with a linguini train, an incandescent teapot rat-trap clown-coat grapevine ghost."<sup>26</sup>

In the last twenty years, Tanaka's reputation as one of the most important and experimental artists of her time has skyrocketed. The first comprehensive showing of Tanaka's works occurred in 2001 with the retrospective exhibition *Atsuko Tanaka: Search for an Unknown Aesthetic, 1954-2000*, curated by Mizuho Kato and organized by the Ashiya City Museum of Art and History and the Shizuoka Prefectural Museum of Art.<sup>27</sup> Tanaka was the first Gutai member to receive a solo exhibition in North America with the 2004 exhibition *Electrifying Art: Atsuko Tanaka 1954-1968*, co-curated by Kato and art historian Ming Tiampo and displayed at the Grey Art Gallery of New York University and the Belkin Art Gallery of the University of British Columbia in Vancouver. *Electric Dress* has also been exhibited in several surveys of Gutai and postwar Japanese art, including the landmark survey *Japanese Art Since 1945: Scream Against the Sky*, curated by Alexandra Munroe at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in 1994 and, most recently, *Gutai: Splendid Playground*, co-curated by Munroe and Ming Tiampo, at the Guggenheim in 2013.<sup>28</sup>

In addition to its recent circulation in international museums, *Electric Dress* and its maker have become popular subjects for scholarly appraisal in exhibition catalogue essays, articles, and other publications. In *Electrifying Art: Atsuko Tanaka 1954-1968*, Mizuho Kato

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<sup>26</sup> B.K. Fischer, "Electric Dress," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 41, nos. 1-2 (2013): 245-246.

<sup>27</sup> See Mizuho Kato, ed., *Atsuko Tanaka: Search for an Unknown Aesthetic, 1954-2000*, trans. Simon Scanes and Keiko Shiraha (Ashiya: Ashiya City Museum of Art and History, 2001).

<sup>28</sup> See Munroe, *Scream Against the Sky*, and Ming Tiampo and Alexandra Munroe, *Gutai: Splendid Playground* (New York: Guggenheim, 2013).

provides a useful framework for considering the artist's work by tracing its critical reception in Japan.<sup>29</sup> Other scholars, like Shinichiro Osaki, have explored Tanaka's practice in relation to the experimental tendencies advocated by Gutai's leader Jirō Yoshihara and within the context of international performance practices.<sup>30</sup> These scholars have provided essential understandings of how Tanaka's art developed and operated within broader artistic tendencies of the 1950s and 1960s.

One of the first essays to analyze Tanaka's *Electric Dress* within the artist's own creative trajectory appeared in Mizuho Kato's "Searching for a Boundary."<sup>31</sup> Her essay persuasively argues that *Electric Dress* and related works differ from the action-oriented works of fellow Gutai artists, as they are "concerned not with a body in motion but rather its everyday appearance and character."<sup>32</sup> Kato explores this idea by considering *Electric Dress* as "Meta Clothes," a shorthand term that acknowledges clothing's ability to alter or invent one's self-image. The flickering lights in Tanaka's garment continually transform the body's surface, creating "a figure of continuing change in the body's image" on the "visible surface where the 'self' is created."<sup>33</sup>

Those who analyze Tanaka's work must reckon with the artist's gendered body as an important component of the performance. As Kato notes, "Even the fact that a small slim woman made and actually wore a work that was so heavy a well-built man would hesitate to carry it,

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<sup>29</sup> See Mizuho Kato's essay "Discursive Conundrums: Rereading the Work of Atsuko Tanaka," in *Electrifying Art*, 39-47.

<sup>30</sup> Shinichiro Osaki, "Body and Place: Action in Postwar Art in Japan," in *Out of Actions*, 120-157.

<sup>31</sup> Mizuho Kato, "Searching for a Boundary," in *Atsuko Tanaka: Search for an Unknown Aesthetic*, 15-25.

<sup>32</sup> Kato, "Searching for a Boundary," 24.

<sup>33</sup> Kato, "Searching for a Boundary," 17.

places it in a realm of the avant-garde.”<sup>34</sup> As the first and one of the very few female artists to join the Gutai group, Tanaka’s 1956 performance at Ōhara Kaikan Hall was a socially radical proposition for its time and place. The inherent danger of the performance and the risk to which she exposed her own body further defied cultural expectations of gender and traditional views of art. Tanaka’s position as a female artist has generated several contrasting scholarly interpretations. For instance, in her catalogue essay for *Gutai: Splendid Playground*, Ming Tiampo contextualizes Tanaka’s performance in light of changing roles for women and views towards sexuality in postwar Japan. According to Tiampo, “*Electric Dress* was ultimately hopeful, however, pursuing beauty and radiating potential at a time when women had just received an expanded package of rights in the American-drafted constitution.”<sup>35</sup> Taking a more radical position, Susan Elizabeth Ryan cites Tanaka’s *Electric Dress* as an early example of socially transgressive art in her book *Garments of Paradise: Wearable Discourse in the Digital Age* (2014), arguing that “the exposure of circuitry upends the idea of women’s dress as a tacit exposure of their sexuality” and that “the danger of the electrical wiring itself threatens normativity [of unified gender and sexual identities].”<sup>36</sup> Gender issues have also come to the forefront in several interpretations of Tanaka’s work, ranging from Arthur C. Danto’s casual description of *Electric Dress*’s “phallic light bulbs that flash every two minutes” to art historian Midori Yoshimoto’s positioning of Tanaka as one of the few Japanese women artists to have

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<sup>34</sup> Kato, “Searching for a Boundary,” 15.

<sup>35</sup> Ming Tiampo, “Please Draw Freely,” in *Gutai: Splendid Playground*, 61.

<sup>36</sup> Susan Elizabeth Ryan, *Garments of Paradise: Wearable Discourse in the Digital Age* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014), 26.

received international attention to date.<sup>37</sup> Making more explicit the connection between gender and war in Tanaka's performance, Darrell D. Davisson characterizes *Electric Dress* as evoking "the image of both a bomb and a phallus."<sup>38</sup>

Art historian Namiko Kunimoto dedicates an entire chapter to exploring the gendered implications of *Electric Dress* in her recent book *The Stakes of Exposure: Anxious Bodies in Postwar Japanese Art* (2017).<sup>39</sup> In her larger study, Kunimoto considers the centrality of the body in Japanese postwar art and its relationship to gender and nationhood. Her chapter on Tanaka's *Electric Dress* and related performances joins three other chapters that explore significant works by Yuki Katsura, Hiroshi Nakamura, and Kazuo Shiraga—all postwar artists who adopted a variety of aesthetic approaches, yet remained united through their representations of vulnerable, fragmented and concealed human forms. According to Kunimoto, these "anxious bodies" of the postwar period reveal both social and psychic shifts in gender subjectivity and embodiment.

Kunimoto's chapter on Atsuko Tanaka considers *Electric Dress* in relation to the changing social status of women and the rapidly transforming industrial transformation of Tanaka's hometown of Osaka. Her study frames Tanaka's *Electric Dress* as an interrogation of surface and selfhood in the increasingly commercialized and highly gendered cultural milieu of 1950s Japan, as explored through the author's excellent use of contemporary magazines,

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<sup>37</sup> See Arthur C. Danto, "Japanese Avant-Garde Art," *Nation*, January 2, 1995, 29; Midori Yoshimoto, "Women Artists in the Japanese Postwar Avant-Garde: Celebrating a Multiplicity," *Woman's Art Journal* 27, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2006): 26-32.

<sup>38</sup> Darrell D. Davisson, *Art After the Bomb: Iconographies of Trauma in Late Modern Art* (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2008), 130.

<sup>39</sup> See Kunimoto, "Tanaka Atsuko and the Circuits of Subjectivity," in *The Stakes of Exposure: Anxious Bodies in Postwar Japanese Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 113-145, 221-29. Kunimoto's chapter is an adaption of a previous article published in *Art Bulletin*. See Kunimoto, "Tanaka Atsuko's *Electric Dress* and the Circuits of Subjectivity," *Art Bulletin* 95, no. 3 (September 2013): 465-483.



newspapers, television, fashion advertisements, and film to examine the female body in commercial Japanese visual culture. Her chapter also considers *Electric Dress* as a “synecdoche of the hustle and bustle of the city,” linking the pulsating light and color of the garment to new forms of high-speed transportation and urban technologies in Osaka.<sup>40</sup> Ultimately, Kunimoto interprets Tanaka’s art as representing a kind of ambivalent subjectivity emblematic of postwar Japan, contingent in its relation to gender and national identity, which she characterizes as a “process reliant on visual signifiers, bodily performance, and the context of industrialization, urbanization, and the encroachment of technology into all aspects of everyday life.”<sup>41</sup>

Kunimoto’s study has significantly added to the growing body of Tanaka scholarship by considering gendered dimensions of her performance that were informed by postwar Japanese visual culture and urban development. Her writing serves as an insightful guide to Tanaka’s art and will be cited throughout this chapter. My study of the artist’s work will continue to explore the politicized body in postwar Japanese performance art by further examining the significance of Tanaka’s engagement with sensory experience, color, and trauma. Before analyzing her 1956 performance of *Electric Dress*, a consideration of Tanaka’s early works and her formative relationship with Gutai will help set the stage for understanding her later experimental works.

### **Tanaka’s Early Works and Influences**

Atsuko Tanaka was born in Osaka on February 10, 1932, as the ninth child in her family, with four older brothers and four older sisters. Her formal art training began at Kyoto City University of Arts, where she briefly studied *yōga* (Western-style) painting, although she soon

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<sup>40</sup> Kunimoto, *Stakes of Exposure*, 122.

<sup>41</sup> Kunimoto, *Stakes of Exposure*, 20.

left in 1951 to study modern art at the Art Institute of Osaka Municipal Museum of Art.<sup>42</sup> There she became close with Kazuo Shiraga and Akira Kanayama, the latter whom she would marry in 1965. Galvanized by their interest in experimental art practices, these artists, along with future Gutai member Saburō Murakami, quickly formed the collective *Zero-kai* (Zero Society) in 1952 and later exhibited their works at the 8<sup>th</sup> Ashiya City Exhibition in 1955, an important avant-garde exhibition launched by Jirō Yoshihara.<sup>43</sup> The group’s interest in conceptual and performance-based approaches, along with their belief that “every work of art begins from nothing,” drew Yoshihara’s attention immediately.<sup>44</sup>

In the same year Tanaka joined *Zero-kai*, embarking on the more experimental artistic trajectory that would mark much of her career, American forces withdrew from their seven-year military occupation. Japan’s defeat following World War II and its subsequent occupation by Allied Forces after 1945 initiated a period of radical social, cultural, and economic transformation. The collapse of Japan’s imperialist regime and resulting changes to the country’s government, economy and social order prompted similar shifts in individual subjectivity and personal relationships.<sup>45</sup> The political background of the post-occupation years—as will later be discussed later in this chapter—are central to recent interpretations of postwar Japanese artist groups.

In 1953 Tanaka temporarily abandoned painting during an extended period of hospitalization due to poor health. Taking the time to explore other mediums, Tanaka began

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<sup>42</sup> Tiampo and Munroe, *Gutai: Splendid Playground*, 307.

<sup>43</sup> Tiampo, *Gutai: Decentering Modernism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 23.

<sup>44</sup> Munroe, *Japanese Art after 1945: Scream Against the Sky*, 185. Munroe references a quote from Kazuo Shiraga’s “Boken no kiroku” (The Record of Adventure), in *Bijutsu Techo* (July 1967): 136-145.

<sup>45</sup> See Mark McLelland, *Love, Sex, and Democracy in Japan during the American Occupation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 4.

experimenting with collage techniques and cloth materials. The early works created in the hospital touch on the regimented sense of time, boredom, and monotony Tanaka experienced during her stay. In anticipation of her hospital release, Tanaka created small collages that featured grid-like arrangements of days and numbers. She continued to make these pieces, each titled *Calendar*, even after leaving the hospital (fig. 3). Made with a variety of materials, including hand-painted paper, ink and pencil, these works offer an early glimpse into Tanaka's incorporation of time into her practice, as well as an interest in repetition and surface.<sup>46</sup> After *Calendar*, Tanaka began using cloth as a primary material for her collages while continuing to pursue designs of repetitive numbers. These works, such as *Work (6)*, c. 1954, move away from the calendar-like format of the first collages and simply feature repeating numbers—in this case, 6—on collaged sheets of hemp or cotton cloth (fig. 4). Deciding that the numbers were still too associative, Tanaka eliminated them completely by 1955, and began exploring works that used brightly colored cloth as the primary subject and material.

The reduction of materials and use of simple designs resonated with the minimalist approach adopted by other *Zero-kai* artists who would exhibit their works at the 8<sup>th</sup> Ashiya City Art Exhibition in June 1955. Tanaka's submission consisted of three pieces made from yellow cotton in various shapes, affixed to a wall in a horizontal configuration, with a ten-meter length of yellow silk cloth spread below them (fig. 5). The smooth surface of the yellow silk offered a tactile counterpoint to the smaller shaped cloths, which Tanaka had cut in several places and mended together with similar fabric. Noting the sensory experience of these juxtaposed cloth objects, Mizuho Kato observes, "In this way the group of cloth works came to act upon the

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<sup>46</sup> For more on Tanaka's *Calendar* series, see Joan Kee, "Situating a Singular Kind of 'Action': Early Gutai Painting, 1954-1957," *Oxford Art Journal* 26, no. 2 (2003): 129.

viewer's body as if to positively wrap them up in its tactile appeal."<sup>47</sup> Much like her later investigations of sensory experience with *Electric Dress*, the varied surfaces and differing scales in Tanaka's cloth pieces created encounters that produced both visual and physical responses in viewers.

By the spring of 1955, all four members of the *Zero-Kai* group, including Tanaka, would join Yoshihara as members of the nascent Gutai collective. Rallying around founder Jirō Yoshihara's call for "daring advances into the unknown world," these artists embraced newness, spontaneity and experimentation in their artmaking.<sup>48</sup> Yoshihara famously laid out the tenets for Gutai artists in his "Gutai Art Manifesto" (1965), which called for the activation of matter by human spirit.<sup>49</sup> Gutai would become the first Japanese avant-garde movement to gain international recognition, particularly with the support of the French critic and Art Informel advocate Michel Tapié.

With the Gutai group, Tanaka's works evolved in their scale and treatment of space, often occupying room-sized galleries, filling outdoor spaces, and taking place on theatre stages. They also developed in their experimental use of materials. Inspired by Yoshihara's philosophy, Tanaka began exploring alternative methods for opening new relationships between her artistic materials and the body—not only her own, but also those of audience members. In the initial years of Gutai, Tanaka would activate her works in a variety of ways through physical movements, as well as through surrounding senses and forces—including wind, and later in *Electric Dress*, electricity.

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<sup>47</sup> Kato, "Searching for a Boundary," 21.

<sup>48</sup> Jirō Yoshihara, "Gutai Manifesto," in *Gutai: Splendid Playground*, 19. Originally published as "Gutai bijutsu sengen," *Geijutsu Shinchō* 7, no. 12 (December 1956): 202-204. Translation provided by Reiko Tomii.

<sup>49</sup> Yoshihara, 18.

Tanaka continued to explore cloth as a central material in the Gutai group exhibition “Experimental Outdoor Modern Art Exhibition to challenge the Mid-Summer Sun” in July 1955. Abandoning the conventions of traditional materials and exhibition spaces, Tanaka created *Work (Pink Rayon)*, a “painting” made from ten square meters of bright pink rayon fabric with a five-centimeter green border that she displayed outdoors in Ashiya Park (figs. 6-7). The cloth’s garish neon color and overwhelming size assaulted the senses and sensibilities of many who viewed it. When the work was reproduced in a smaller 3x4 meter version a few months later at the 1<sup>st</sup> Gutai Art Exhibition in October 1955, Shōzō Shimamoto would write the following:

The color pink, dominating more than 90 percent of her fabric work, looked utterly vulgar. If the artist were to keep this flimsy rayon cloth after the exhibition and put it up for fire sale, no sane Japanese person would buy it. I wonder where on earth she found fabric in such a nauseating color. The same can be said of the color of the thin green band with which she hemmed this work. Besides, she merely hung it, hardly working with it at all. The cheapness of the rayon, which could at best be used in handicrafts, contrasted sharply with the gravity that traditional tableau painting assumes. How insignificant it looked!<sup>50</sup>

Shimamoto’s description disparages the work’s aesthetic qualities in no uncertain terms.

However, despite the critical words, he ultimately defends her work as new, a more important quality in pushing art’s limits than beauty.

Although Tanaka’s choice of a particularly unnatural color set her work apart in the 1955 Ashiya Park event, other Gutai artists similarly advanced the use of expressive colors in their own works. In addition to their experimental and performative methods, the use of bold color characterizes much of Gutai’s output in the mid-1950s, including the saturated reds of Kazuo Shiraga’s action paintings, created with the artist’s bare feet, as in *Work II* (1958) (fig. 8); the

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<sup>50</sup> Shimamoto Shōzō, “Can a Piece of Cloth Be a Work of Art?,” in *Gutai: Splendid Playground*, 280. Originally published as “Ichi-mai no nunokire demo geijutsu sakuhin ka,” *Gutai* 4 (July 1956): 31.

multi-colored splattered canvases of Shōzō Shimamoto, whose 1956 *Throws of Color* featured smashed glasses jars filled with different pigments onto canvases (fig. 9); and Sadamasa Motonaga's *Work (Water)* (1956), which featured a series of criss-crossing transparent plastic tubes suspended from tree branches and filled with colored water (figs. 10-11). Like Tanaka's *Work (Pink Rayon)*, Motonaga's materials responded to the sunlight and wind to produce reflecting tones and movement. Yet Tanaka's works, as Shimamoto's quote suggests, stand apart for not only her unnatural, monochromatic choice of color, but also for her incorporation of less savory materials of the postwar landscape, in this instance her use of low-quality, mass-produced synthetic fabric, presented in a largely unaltered fashion. Shimamoto's remarks on the cheapness and commercial origins of the material also evoke a gendered critique of her work, as he associates her choice of material with handcrafted items, a historically lesser artistic form typically associated with female labor.

The so-called “nauseating” color and visual shock of *Work (Pink Rayon)* paralleled the auditory shock of *Work (Bell)*, a second work Tanaka displayed at the 1<sup>st</sup> Gutai Art Exhibition (fig. 12). Indeed, the two works are connected in their concept as well as execution, as the idea for *Work (Bell)* originated in Tanaka seeing *Work (Pink Rayon)* interact with its surrounding environment. Observing the cloth flutter in the wind, Tanaka thought it would be interesting to create a painting in motion.<sup>51</sup> In addition to her experimentations with surface through bright cloth and collage techniques, Tanaka pursued expanded sensory encounters through sound-based works. Her *Work (Bell)* consisted of a switch-operated network of small metal bells arranged at two-meter intervals around the perimeter of a room. A small card invited viewers to push a

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<sup>51</sup> Miyuki Minami, “The Message of Absence: A Note on *Work (Bells)*,” in *Atsuko Tanaka: Search for an Unknown Aesthetic, 1954-2000*, 159 and n. 11.

button that activated the bells, creating a loud noise that filled the space. Spectators could press the button for as long as they wished. By opening the work up to audience participation, Tanaka assigns the viewer a central role in determining if and how the work functions, a marked contrast to her later role as the occupant and activator of *Electric Dress*. Based on firsthand experience of the installation, Akira Kanayama observed:

The person who turns it on (the viewer) will be oblivious of the creator of this device: The viewer, the expanse of the space, the traveling ringing sound, and the meaning that arises thereof all become part of the process where a new form of art defines itself. Tanaka's work employing bells, thus, is the result of her choice to depart from conventional concepts of art and find significance in the immediacy of the experience.<sup>52</sup>

Finding a connection between both of the works on display at the exhibition, Kato notes, "Her work in pink silk awoke the physical senses with its expansive surface as though it could cover the viewer, however *Work "Bell"* affected the body directly through sound as it moved moment by moment and made the audience aware of the dynamic relationship between the surrounding environment and the body."<sup>53</sup>

Within Japan's historical and cultural contexts, the presence of bells in a quiet gallery space may very well signal the function of and religious spaces for Buddhist temple bells, or *bonshō*, traditionally used by monks to announce periods of prayer and to mark time. In their secular uses, these large bronze bells, whose reverberations could be heard from far distances, were also used to warn city inhabitants of fire outbreaks or advancing enemy forces.

Temple bells took on a new militarized function during World War II, as the Japanese government identified them as a readily available metal source to melt down for weapons and

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<sup>52</sup> Akira Kanayama, quoted in Minami, 158.

<sup>53</sup> Kato, "Searching for a Boundary," 21.

ammunition manufacture.<sup>54</sup> Following the war, the demand to reinstate these important religious and cultural objects in Japanese temples surged, creating a new industry of machine-made bells on a much larger scale of production.<sup>55</sup> While it is unclear whether Tanaka intended this particular history to be associated with her work (and based on her previous statements regarding her apolitical position, she likely did not), *Work (Bell)* originated at a time of widespread production, which was undoubtedly an important industry for those who wished the replacement of significant cultural artifacts lost during the war. In addition to the sensory elements of *Work (Bell)* that connect experientially to *Electric Dress* and other related pieces, *Work (Bell)* might further be examined for its exploration of war memory and loss through its use of modernized bells. Considering *bonshō* served as an early warning system, one might also explore the prophetic quality of *Work (Bell)* as an alarm for approaching disaster, created by Tanaka before the blinding light of *Electric Dress* would touch her audiences.

Although *Work (Bell)* relies on auditory stimulation, it also highlights the viewer's physical relationship with the surrounding space. This visual and spatial engagement is explored by Ming Tiampo, who observes, "The bells, ringing in sequence from closest to farthest, not only created an 'acoustic composition' that referred to the composition of a painting, but also defined a space. In this work, Tanaka challenged the borders between different registers of experience—space, sound, sight, time—by considering the use of time and sound to articulate space and

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<sup>54</sup> Kawase Takaya, "Anti-War and Peace Movements Among Japanese Buddhists after the Second World War," in *Buddhism and Violence: Militarism and Buddhism in Modern Asia*, eds. Vladimir Tikhonov and Torkel Brekke, trans. Micah L. Auerback (New York: Routledge, 2013), 211. See also a firsthand account by Kōno Kiyoko, "Where Did the Temple Bell Go?," in *Sensō: The Japanese Remember the Pacific War*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. Frank Gibney and trans. Beth Cary (New York: Routledge, 2015), 180.

<sup>55</sup> Harada Kazuyoshi, "New Bells with an Age-old Sound: Oigo Seisakusho," *Nippon*, October 7, 2013, <https://www.nippon.com/en/features/c00614/>.



composition.”<sup>56</sup> Sadamasa Motonaga, a contemporary of Tanaka’s and fellow Gutai artist, further characterized the intertwined sensory experiences of *Work (Bell)*, describing its auditory experience in visual terms as “a unique [experience] in which a line is drawn clearly within one’s inner vision.”<sup>57</sup> The continued significance of *Work (Bell)* has led to two new versions of the work, both created in the 1980s, and its recent display at *Gutai: Splendid Playground* at the Guggenheim Museum in 2013 and the Fergus McCaffrey gallery’s exhibition *Gutai: 1953-1959* in 2018.<sup>58</sup>

Tanaka’s interest in the expressive potential of color and clothing as a primary artistic material continued throughout her initial years in Gutai. Along with *Work (Pink Rayon)*, Tanaka presented the more tonally subdued *Work (Yellow Cloth)* in 1956, a similar work consisting of one long piece of yellow fabric cut from a bolt, and two shorter lengths hung above it. The following year, Tanaka performed a piece entitled *Stage Clothes* for Gutai Art on Stage in Osaka (figs. 13-14). For this performance Tanaka emerged on stage wearing a short green organza dress that revealed detachable parts as the performance unfolded. The lower sleeves came off first, then the midsection, to reveal a yellow garment underneath. Once removed a different fabric and color—a fuchsia chiffon gown—was made visible. Each layer revealed a different configuration of hue, shape, and textile until the artist wore only a black leotard, barely visible against the stage’s black backdrop. Tanaka’s body essentially became the support structure for creating new compositions.

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<sup>56</sup> Tiampo, “Electrifying Painting,” 68.

<sup>57</sup> Sadamasa Motonaga’s quote appeared in *A Handbook for Gutai Art*, a brochure printed for the 1st Gutai Art Exhibition in 1955. His comments on Tanaka’s *Work (Bell)* are translated and quoted in Tiampo, “Electrifying Painting,” 69.

<sup>58</sup> For a discussion of the Fergus McCaffrey Gallery show, see Roberta Smith, “Japanese Gutai in the 1950s: Fast and Fearless,” *New York Times*, June 14, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/14/arts/design/japanese-gutai-art-1950s.html>.

For her interest in expanding the physical boundaries of art, Tanaka's *Stage Clothes* performance shares an affinity with the *parangolés* of Brazilian artist Hélio Oiticica, whose colorful cape-like garments similarly presented painting as a wearable art form. While Oiticica's *parangolés* will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter, it is worth noting that these contemporaneous artists both sought ways of transforming their art through its relationship with the body. Oiticica originally intended his *parangolés* to be worn by samba dancers, whose movements could effectively activate the *parangolé* and initiate a total experience between the body, art object, and environment. Tanaka's *Stage Clothes*, while worn and manipulated by the artist, strike an entirely different tone. Writing about the performance, Namiko Kunimoto describes it in the following terms: "Though the dresses were frilly, colorful, and generally ostentatious, her clipped movements and efficient manner maintained an insistently sober atmosphere. . . . Movements superfluous to the removing of clothes were kept to a strict minimum."<sup>59</sup> The libidinal energy of Oiticica's *parangolés*, animated by the sensual moves of young samba dancers, stands in contrast to the decidedly unerotic quality of Tanaka's solitary performance. *Stage Clothes* relies less on the movements of the body and more on its potential for metamorphosis—a key point of difference with Oiticica. The quick succession of outfit changes, each different from the next, deemphasized the artist's own body and focused attention on its ever-changing surface.

Addressing the gendered implications of the performance, one present-day critic commented that Tanaka's disrobing provided "something more than a striptease: she was expanding the concept of what a painting could be."<sup>60</sup> This comment takes on particular

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<sup>59</sup> Kunimoto, "Tanaka Atsuko's *Electric Dress* and the Circuits of Subjectivity," 475.

<sup>60</sup> Janet Koplos, "Circuitries of Color," *Art in America* 92, no. 10 (November 2004): 144.

significance in light of the highly sexualized and public female body present in postwar Japan. During the Allied Occupation, the accessibility of women's bodies, both visually and physically, pervaded daily life, from the ubiquitous presence of the *panpan*, or prostitute, who engaged in sexual commerce with American soldiers, to the first Western-style beauty pageant in 1947.<sup>61</sup> The presence of Japanese women in print media and advertisements, styled after Western fashion ads, grew too, as did their appearance in erotically charged forms of cinema and theatre events, primarily created for and consumed by male audiences.

In the realm of performance, one of the more popular early forms of erotic entertainment during the Occupation years was the *Meiga arubamu* (Collection of Painting Masterpieces), a show developed by Hata Toyokichi that featured seminude Japanese women posed within large-scale picture frames as figures from famous Western paintings. In one example, audiences stood in line from the street up to the fifth floor of the building to see a nearly nude female performer pose on a clamshell, modeled after the Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus*. These wildly popular picture shows acted as a precursor to the American-style striptease shows that emerged in Asakusa, one of the major entertainment districts in Tokyo, in the late 1940s and early 1950s.<sup>62</sup>

While *Stage Clothes* goes through the motions of a striptease—Tanaka removes her clothes one piece at a time on a stage with an audience—she refuses to grant visual access to her body. Although she undresses before a crowd, the act is remarkably desexualized. With the growing pervasiveness of female sexualization and commercialization through screen, stage and print media in postwar Japan, Tanaka's work stakes out a form of self-presentation that does not

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<sup>61</sup> Ayako Saito, "Occupation and Memory: The Representation of Woman's Body in Postwar Japanese Cinema," in *The Oxford Handbook of Japanese Cinema*, ed. Daisuke Miyao (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 331-332.

<sup>62</sup> Yoshiko Fukushima, "To the Rhythm of Jazz: Enoken's Postwar Japanese Musical Comedies," in *Rising from the Flames: The Rebirth of Theater in Occupied Japan, 1945-1952*, ed. Samuel Leiter (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2009), 340.

traffic in the objectifying norms for performing female bodies of her day. *Electric Dress*, a heavy, cumbersome garment that largely immobilized its wearer and restricted her movements, offers an even starker contrast in its decidedly unerotic quality. While contemporary presentations of the sexualized female body emphasized skin and movement, Tanaka's electric garment required a motionless body on the inside to support the work's weight and to emphasize its outer surface. The body is quite literally central to the piece, yet it does not command the same attention as the outer boundary of the garment's blinking contours, a perimeter that both illuminates and closes off visual access to the body.

Yet not all of Tanaka's form remains obscured. Although mostly hidden by the physical bulk and chaotic illumination of the *Electric Dress*, Tanaka's face is clearly visible in extant photographs of the performance. With a calm expression, Tanaka looks out from the stage, returning the audience's gaze and establishing a clear sense of authorship and agency. In the context of the Japanese popular stage, with its rising display of female skin for male audiences, Tanaka's work overturns gendered expectations of the male viewer and female performer relationship. The emphasis on Tanaka's face further signals the artist's own self-fashioning as an avant-garde performer defined by her individualism and capacity for risk, rather than her physical features. By creating an outer covering of mesmerizing, colorful illumination, Tanaka transfers potential discussions of visual appeal away from her own body to an external form. As one of the very few female artists in Gutai, this externalization of beauty potentially served the function of not only desexualizing her body in the context of her performances, but also deemphasizing her gender amongst her peers in her largely male-dominated community of experimental artists.

The appearance of Tanaka's body and its interaction with her artistic materials also notably differs from her male Gutai colleagues, who frequently used their bodies in much more physically active and dynamic performances. Kazuo Shiraga's *Challenging Mud* (1955), for instance, featured the artist wrestling a thick mixture of materials—clay, mud, and stones—in an attempt to move the natural matter that surrounded him (fig. 15). Saburō Murakami's *At One Moment Opening Six Holes* (1955) involved the artist's aggressive manipulation of materials by punching through paper walls reminiscent of Japanese *shōji* screens (fig. 16). These performances are characteristic of the action-driven, often violent confrontation between body and material enacted by Gutai artists, what Ming Tiampo characterizes as the “muscular, corporeal language of radical individualism” typical of these physical performances.<sup>63</sup>

*Electric Dress*, on the other hand, is much more static. Tanaka fuses her body with technological elements, outsourcing the dynamic quality of the performance to an external power source, rather than transforming her materials through the actions of her own body. While accounts of postwar Japanese art emphasize the physical presence of the artist and masculine rhetoric of action and heroic struggles typical of Shiraga's and Murakami's performances, Tanaka's work challenges such a narrative of the individual, active, and politicized male body in postwar Japan by adopting and subverting the feminine associations of passivity, stasis, and beauty.<sup>64</sup> Although she barely moved, Tanaka's performance far surpassed her male counterparts in terms of physical risk. And although she surrounded herself in a blinding beauty, the work had

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<sup>63</sup> Ming Tiampo, “Please Draw Freely,” in *Gutai: Splendid Playground*, 57.

<sup>64</sup> The discourse of the individualistic body within the immediate postwar environment has assumed a more important place in Japanese art-historical scholarship due in large part to the extensive writings of Ming Tiampo. See Tiampo, “Body, War, and the Discourses of History: Rethinking Postwar Japanese Art,” in *Art and War in Japan and its Empire, 1931-1960*, eds. Asato Ikeda, Aya Louisa McDonald, and Ming Tiampo (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 339-352; Tiampo, “Gutai Chain: The Collective Spirit of Individualism,” *positions: east asia cultures critique* 2 (2013): 383-415.

the potential to produce extreme sensory and cognitive shock for contemporary viewers. The following section will explore how these dualities resonate with Tanaka's work and formulations of postwar trauma.

### ***Electric Dress and Postwar Memory***

Tanaka's performance of *Electric Dress*, far from an isolated event, occurred within a clear trajectory of experimentation with both wearable forms, sensory engagement, and expressive use of color. While *Work (Bell)* initiated new sensory encounters for viewers, and *Stage Clothes* put forth the artist's body as a vehicle for artistic transformation, it was *Electric Dress* that combined these two propositions to create a work that resonated psychologically and sensorially with postwar audiences. On the occasion of Tanaka's performance at the Second Gutai Art Exhibition in 1956, more than ten years had passed since the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and only two years since American military forces had ended their occupation. Yet memories of both wartime atrocities and the radical transformation of national identity and everyday life in the immediate postwar period loomed large for Japanese citizens and artists. As one scholar has noted, "Since 1945, the destruction of visual order by the atomic light and force has haunted Japanese visual culture."<sup>65</sup> This section takes up the specter of the bomb by exploring the sensory qualities of her *Electric Dress* performance.

On August 6, 1945, the U.S. ordered the first atomic bombing of Japan at Hiroshima, an act that would kill approximately 140,000 people in the initial blast and over the next four months from the immediate effects of radiation sickness. The next detonation over Nagasaki on August 9 would add tens of thousands more casualties. Those who witnessed the bombing of

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<sup>65</sup> Lippit, 4.

Hiroshima observed an annihilating and blinding light as the atomic explosion de-materialized a city and its inhabitants within minutes.<sup>66</sup> The bright flash (*pika*) was followed by intense heat, force and energy that, in the notes of a current scholar, “exposed and transformed every living and nonliving thing in a telos of light and matter.”<sup>67</sup> The atomic bombing has been characterized as a moment of excess visuality, of an ultimate “light-weapon” unleashed in an unprecedented way.<sup>68</sup> As Akira Mizuta Lippit writes, the ensuing atomic radiation “assailed the bodies it touched, exposed the fragility of the human surface, the capacity of catastrophic light and lethal radiation to penetrate the human figure at its limit.”<sup>69</sup> The impact of the blast, with its intense heat, bright flashing, and transformation of space into light, left long-lasting physical and psychological damage on the country and its inhabitants. In its violence and sweeping scale, the atomic bombing acted as a foundational moment of national trauma.

Trauma, from the Greek for piercing, is typically used to describe a kind of psychological wounding, a penetration of one’s interior psychic realm by an outside force. The term emerged in the psychoanalytic writings of Sigmund Freud in the early twentieth century and has since formed the basis of its own academic field.<sup>70</sup> In Freud’s formulation, trauma is incurred when the

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<sup>66</sup> To read more about firsthand accounts of the atomic bombing, see Kyoko Selden and Mark Selden, *The Atomic Bomb: Voices from Hiroshima and Nagasaki* (London: M.E. Sharpe, 1989).

<sup>67</sup> Adam Broinowski, *Cultural Responses to Occupation in Japan: The Performing Body During and After the Cold War* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 8.

<sup>68</sup> Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception* (London: Verso, 1989), 101.

<sup>69</sup> Lippit, 4.

<sup>70</sup> For more on trauma studies, see Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999) and Marianne Hirsch’s concept of postmemory in “The Generation of Postmemory,” *Poetics Today* 29, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 103-128. Postmemory is a term formulated by Hirsch to describe the transmission of traumatic personal and collective memories from one generation to the next by means of stories, images, and other mediated forms.

bodily or psychic inside encounters an irruption from the outside.<sup>71</sup> In his early studies, Freud frequently cites modern technology as a major factor in the formation of traumatic events, including railway accidents as one example of an external shock that led its victims to traumatic neuroses.<sup>72</sup> His publication *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) notably addressed the traumatic impact of war, most famously manifested in the “shell shock” of World War I combat soldiers. As Marilyn Ivy notes, “At its inception, then, trauma indexed the relationship of modernity and contingency, of the accident of something that befalls one from the outside, of a dangerous exteriority that can unpredictably wound.”<sup>73</sup>

Extending Freud’s formulation of trauma to his own times, Walter Benjamin would claim that the battlefield experience of shock “has become the norm” in modern life, indeed, shock has become the essence of modern experience.<sup>74</sup> For Benjamin, the daily impact of industrial production approximated the psychological assault of the battlefield. In his discussion of modern technology’s psychological effects, Benjamin characterizes the motor responses of industrial technology, including the jolting, switching and snapping movements of machines, as a sequence of repetitive moments without development, a sectioning of time that corresponds to psychological trauma’s continual holding pattern.<sup>75</sup> Both war and technological advancements act as fundamental causes of psychic shock in modern society. As Susan Buck-Morss observes,

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<sup>71</sup> Marilyn Ivy, “Trauma’s Two Times: Japanese Wars and Postwars,” *positions: east asia cultures critique* 16, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 167.

<sup>72</sup> See Sigmund Freud, “Outline of Psycho-Analysis” (1938), vol. 23 of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (New York: Macmillan, 1964), 184.

<sup>73</sup> Ivy, 167.

<sup>74</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Verso, 1983), 116.

<sup>75</sup> Susan Buck-Morss, “Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin’s Artwork Essay Reconsidered,” *October* 62 (Autumn 1992): 16.



Benjamin's understanding of modern experience is largely neurological—"it centers on shock" as "the technologically altered environment exposed the human sensorium to physical shocks that have their correspondence in psychic shock."<sup>76</sup>

Freud's formulation of trauma and Benjamin's exploration of the psychic impact of technology find multiple points of connection in Tanaka's performance. Although on an incalculably smaller and less calamitous scale, Tanaka's *Electric Dress* echoes the visual and sensorial qualities described by those who experienced the atomic blast. Emerging from the stage in darkness, Tanaka's garment produced a sudden flashing of blinding light and bright colors. As the intensity of the blinking electric bulbs increased in quick, irregular intervals, they filled the Ōhara Kaikan performance hall with a chaotic and powerful energy. Audience members experienced the sensory jolt of the garment's blindingly bright lights and multiple colors, as well as the heat and noise emanating from the electric gearbox.<sup>77</sup>

Tanaka's garment also triggered the real possibility of bodily harm. As the epigraph of this chapter suggests, Tanaka expressed discomfort with wearing an electrical garment, as she faced not only the threat of electrocution, but also the risk of badly cutting herself if any of the fragile light bulbs broke under the weight of the garment. For audience members, the glimpse of the artist's face within its technological covering heightened the tension between the human core and the perilous materials surrounding it. While their senses were no doubt viscerally engaged during the performance, the separation between the stage and the floor created yet another

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<sup>76</sup> Buck-Morss, 17.

<sup>77</sup> Namiko Kunimoto translates Akira Kanayama's description of the work in Okabe Aomi's film *Tanaka Atsuko mōhitosu no Gutai*, citing that the motor designed for the garment was made by an amateur electrician, and that it was "exceedingly noisy." See Kunimoto, "Circuits of Subjectivity," n. 12.

psychological barrier. The vulnerability of Tanaka's form on stage amplified the anxieties of an audience who could only watch passively as the event unfolded.

The sudden illumination of *Electric Dress* not only evoked the initial blast—a moment of immense destruction—it also evoked another critical dimension of trauma: the precarious boundary between inside and outside. In his catalogue essay for *Atsuko Tanaka: The Art of Connecting*, Jonathan Watkins describes the connection in the following terms: “To be sure, the *Electric Dress* is a response to the look of a post-war urban landscape, but more it is a psychological expression out of trauma, so that we immediately read its electrical circuit as a metaphor for a mass of neurons, firing synapses and autonomic nervous reactions.”<sup>78</sup> Tanaka's dress references the body's neurological processes by externally visualizing the body's internal networks. The firing bright lights of Tanaka's garment indeed echo the body's inner connections and systems, materializing the electrical charges that pass through the brain's network of synapses. *Electric Dress*'s allusion to the nervous system parallels the sensory stimulation of light produced by the garment, as well as color, which is sensed from photoreceptors in the eye that detect different wavelengths of light. The senses are effects of the nervous system, which are made from billions of neurons that extend sensual perception from the brain to all areas of the body. Yet the nervous system is not contained within the body; rather, it extends to the outer world, where one's sense-perception begins. Elaborating on this cycle of interior and exterior

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<sup>78</sup> Jonathan Watkins, “Broader Horizons,” in *Atsuko Tanaka: The Art of Connecting*, 143. In an earlier text, Watkins similarly connects Tanaka's *Electric Dress* to the systems of the human body: “They are extraordinary as they refer at once to their inspiration and the process by which they are made. And not only are the artist's physical actions, the movement of her body as she applies the paint to a canvas on the floor, manifested in her work; so too is a certain biomorphism. The configurations equally refer to animal/human circulatory and nervous systems—these in turn are reflected in our curious social organizations—and so the viewer cannot avoid identification with the nature and subject of Tanaka's paintings.” See Jonathan Watkins, “Facts of Life” in *Facts of Life: Contemporary Japanese Art*, ed. Jonathan Watkins and Mami Kataoka (London: Hayward Gallery, 2001), 15.

exchange, Buck-Morss writes: “As the source of stimuli and the arena for motor response, the external world must be included to complete the sensory circuit.”<sup>79</sup>

The origins of *Electric Dress* provide another point from which to consider the relationship between internal and external dynamics. On the inspiration for *Electric Dress*, Tanaka wrote:

For a long time I tried to come up with an interesting idea [for a changing dress]. After half a year or so, I was seated on a bench at the Osaka station, and I saw a billboard featuring a pharmaceutical advertisement, brightly illuminated by neon lights. This was it! I would make a neon dress!<sup>80</sup>

The subject of the billboard—a pharmaceutical advertisement—seems at first incidental to Tanaka’s primary interest in the brightly colored neon lights, a common fixture in Japan’s postwar urban landscape. Yet the advertisement represents something far more resonant and wide-reaching than Tanaka’s anecdotal comment suggests. The commercial drugs advertised in the billboard conjure chemical treatments for sickness, a balm for physical and psychological conditions that plagued Japanese bodies in the postwar period. The physical effects of the bomb impacted victims on a cellular level. The *hibakusha* (people of the fire bomb), were exposed to radiation in the bomb’s initial detonation or ingested radioactive particles in the aftermath of the blast, besetting them with chronic and debilitating illnesses. As the bodies of the *hibakusha* were exposed and fundamentally transformed by the radioactive effects of the atomic bomb, “the U.S. occupier literally inscribed itself into the bio-physical memory of the exposed environment,” as cultural historian Adam Broinowski phrases it.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Buck-Morss, 12.

<sup>80</sup> Tanaka quoted in Jonathan Watkins, “Broader Horizons,” 143.

<sup>81</sup> Broinowski, 10.

The psychological impact of the bombing resonated on a massive scale as Japan's social order was violently disturbed both during and after the war. The psychic tenuousness of postwar life extends to Tanaka, too, in light of her own struggles with mental health that would lead to a period of institutionalization in 1965.<sup>82</sup> Japan had the highest suicide rate in the industrial world in the mid-1950s, peaking in 1956 at the rate of 24 per 100,000 people per year. The most likely demographic to commit suicide were women between the ages of twenty and twenty-four years old, a group that would include the artist.<sup>83</sup> The vulnerability of Japanese women during the postwar era highlights the tenuousness of mental health, particularly of young women, during that time. Compellingly argued by Kunimoto in her article "Tanaka Atsuko's *Electric Dress* and the Circuits of Subjectivity," this instability was enhanced and accelerated by the transformation of Japanese society during the 1950s, as Japan experienced a period of great technological development, including high-speed transport and rapid industrialization. The increased role of technology in society profoundly shaped gendered subjectivity in the postwar years, with particularly detrimental effects on women. In Kunimoto's reading, Tanaka's art "suggests the threat posed by technological advancement," largely through its ability to destabilize subjectivity and promote alienation through the mass replacement of "the televised body and the commercially represented body."<sup>84</sup> However, in her focus on the body, Kunimoto's reading neglects to consider the importance of Tanaka's visible face. Although her body is covered in the materials of modern technology, Tanaka's face, which acts as an identifiably human feature underneath it, functions as a focal point of the work, suggesting an act of resistance against the

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<sup>82</sup> Kunimoto, *Stakes of Exposure*, 141.

<sup>83</sup> Kunimoto, "Circuits of Subjectivity," 478.

<sup>84</sup> Kunimoto, *Stakes of Exposure*, 143.

body's complete absorption of technology and its deleterious effects.

Kunimoto's nuanced discussion of subjectivity in postwar Japan informs her reading of *Electric Dress* as a work of art that "emphasized the ability of industrial force to overwhelm the senses."<sup>85</sup> In her reading, the sensory overload of the postwar urban environment, reflected in the flashing bright lights and ever-changing surface of Tanaka's work, ultimately puts the viewer and subject in an anxious and unanchored position. Rephrasing her argument in *The Stakes of Exposure: Anxious Bodies in Postwar Japanese Art*, Kunimoto claims that *Electric Dress* invites "sensory contact but den[ies] any sense of sensory pleasure."<sup>86</sup> Yet as the artist's experience with the billboard shows, Tanaka also looked to the bright, colorful illumination of the city as a source of visual pleasure and artistic inspiration, capable of producing both extreme beauty and psychic shock.

The traumatic shock of technology corresponds to the potential cognitive shocks created by the sensory stimulus of light, heat, and sound in Tanaka's performance. As Adam Broinowski contends, "As cognitive shock is integral to the psychic recognition of suppressed reality, when it occurs, a dominant structure is destabilized and its natural permanence is relativized."<sup>87</sup> This idea can be fruitfully explored in the suppression of war memory in Japanese culture in the postwar period. Not long after the atomic destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Emperor Hirohito declared Japan's unconditional surrender to Allied forces on August 15, 1945, bringing an end to World War II. Following the country's surrender, American forces arrived and began dismantling the country's imperial order and military, replacing it with a constitution informed

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<sup>85</sup> Kunimoto, "Circuits of Subjectivity," 466-67.

<sup>86</sup> Kunimoto, *Stakes of Exposure*, 129.

<sup>87</sup> Broinowski, 74.

by American democratic values. Censorship was a common practice during the occupation years, and was used by both American and Japanese governments to restrict representations of the war.<sup>88</sup> Photographic images of war and the catastrophic effects of the atomic bomb were banned between 1945 and 1952.<sup>89</sup> The cultural repression apparent during Japan's occupation led to a culture of silence and repression surrounding the war.

Miryam Sas observes in her book *Experimental Arts in Postwar Japan: Moments of Encounter, Engagement, and Imagined Return*, "Since darkness is linked with the past, with memories, with the repressed terrain of material that is beyond the possibility of access, it comes to hold a privileged place as a metaphor for the psyche."<sup>90</sup> Sas continues that this darkness extends beyond the individual psyche to "emblemize elements of a cultural consciousness that have been blocked or closed off through a dynamic matrix of actions and representations."<sup>91</sup> The appearance of Tanaka on the dark stage of Ōhara Kaikan hall metaphorically represented an unbearable illumination of the past, a nearly blinding brightness containing expressions of both trauma and beauty.

In 1951, the Abstract Expressionist painter Willem de Kooning would describe the atomic bomb's effects in the following terms: "Today, some people think that the light of the atom bomb will change the concept of painting once and for all. The eyes that actually saw the light melted out of sheer ecstasy. For one instant, everybody was the same color. It made angels

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<sup>88</sup> See Harry Harootunian's "Japan Postwar and After, 1945-1989: An Overview," in *From Postwar to Postmodern: Art in Japan, 1945-1989*, ed. Doryun Chong et al. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2012), 17-19.

<sup>89</sup> Julia Adeney Thomas, "How to Look at Disaster: A Primer for Viewers," in *Beyond Hiroshima: The Return of the Repressed: Wartime Memory, Performativity, and the Documentary in Contemporary Japanese Photography and Video Art*, ed. Ayelet Zohar (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Art Gallery, 2015), 37.

<sup>90</sup> Miryam Sas, *Experimental Arts in Postwar Japan: Moments of Encounter, Engagement, and Imagined Return* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 72.

<sup>91</sup> Sas, 72.

out of everybody.”<sup>92</sup> From a Western, American, and Allied perspective, De Kooning’s enraptured and unnerving rhetoric frames the atomic bombing as a sublime experience, an instantaneous moment of religiosity, inspiration, and utter destruction. His remark “everybody was the same color” touches on the perverse leveling effect the bomb produced in its wake. In her microcosmic work, Tanaka’s *Electric Dress* partly engages with this rhetoric of the sublime, as it produces “a beauty that could not be made by human hands,” yet her work intentionally presents a variegated visual surface, full of richly colored, individual components. Unlike the white light of the atomic bomb blast—a uniformity in color that corresponds with de Kooning’s phrasing—Tanaka’s work moves beyond literal representations of wartime visuals with her bright and expressive use of color. It is this use of color, as Merleau-Ponty describes in “Eye and Mind,” that acts as a critical dimension in experiencing art, as it “creates identities, differences, a texture, a materiality, a something.”<sup>93</sup> Indeed, Tanaka’s emphasis on color introduces an additional interpretive dimension to her work—not only as a piece that engages in discourses of postwar trauma with its powerful sensory effects, but also as a work preoccupied with beauty through her expressively colored and luminous materials. Her work does not aestheticize trauma or the suffering of others, but rather uses beauty to represent affecting and transformative encounters that open up the possibility of processing, remembering, and moving past trauma.

As a final element to consider, one must also explore the additional works that incorporated elements of *Electric Dress*, as well as the potential influence Tanaka’s work had on the practices of her fellow (male) Gutai members. The 1956 event at the Second Gutai Art Exhibition was not the only time Tanaka performed *Electric Dress*. As Namiko Kunimoto has

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<sup>92</sup> Willem de Kooning, “What Abstract Art Means to Me” (1951), *Willem de Kooning*, ed. Thomas B. Hess (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1969), 146.

<sup>93</sup> Merleau-Ponty, 181.

observed, the multiple appearances of *Electric Dress*, “as a performance piece worn by the artist, as a piece worn by male performers, as an unworn installation, as a reconstruction and, as it is most widely seen, as a photographic record of her performance—make defining and assessing the piece challenging.”<sup>94</sup> A variation of her electric garment was indeed worn by male members of Gutai. In 1957, fellow artists Shiraga Kazuo, Satō Seiichi, and Toyoshima Takashi donned costumes made from colored flashing lightbulbs in an untitled performance following Tanaka’s performance of *Stage Clothes*. The figures emerged on stage dressed in costumes made of blinking colored light bulbs, framed against the backdrop of a giant red dress, also covered in lights, that measured thirteen feet tall and with sleeves nearly thirty feet long.<sup>95</sup> The entire performance, which was designed by Tanaka and included sound, light, costumes and stage set, offered a complete vision of her artistic environment, full of light, color and the potential for connectivity through the participation of her male Gutai colleagues. As Tanaka’s *Electric Dress*-inspired works were worn by both men and women, the work further suggests an expanded, progressive social circuitry in its movement from Tanaka to other members of the Gutai group. However, as the looming presence of the huge dress form in the background insinuates, issues of gender are never far out of sight. The evocative presence of the overscale empty dress at once announces an aggressive claim of space while undercutting that claim with the absent female body. The dress looms like a specter over the stage, an overlarge, ghost-like form that visualizes the invisible female body through its sartorial surface.

Kunimoto further observes that the reuse of the garment’s light bulbs in later works and Tanaka’s *Electric Dress* drawings both before and after the piece was realized make it difficult to

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<sup>94</sup> Kunimoto, *Stakes of Exposure*, 117.

<sup>95</sup> Tiampo, “Electrifying Painting,” in *Electrifying Art*, 72.



pin down a definite start or end point to the work. The work was originally performed in front of a series of 20 drawings inspired by the sketches Tanaka made in preparation of constructing the garment. Drawing upon the same monumental presence of the dress in *Stage Clothes*, Tanaka placed these large-scale drawings as the backdrop to her performance at the Ōhara Kaikan Hall performance. As Ming Tiampo observes, “The overall impression of the installation was not that of technical plans displayed to explain the creation of the exhibited dress, but rather a visual meditation on the endless combinations of colour and shape made possible by Tanaka’s machine.”<sup>96</sup> The majority of these works showcased the particular visual vocabulary of brightly colored circles and rectangles connected by thin, wiry lines that would define Tanaka’s post-*Electric Dress* paintings.

*Stage Clothes* and *Electric Dress* might have very well influenced other Gutai artists, too, as illustrated in Shiraga Kazuo’s *Ultramodern Sanbasō*, also performed at Gutai Art on Stage at Sankei Kaikan in Osaka on May 29, 1957 (fig. 17). The title of Shiraga’s performance refers to an auspicious ceremonial blessing performed at the beginning of traditional Japanese stage events. Dressed as a Sanbasō character, Shiraga performed a new version of the rite at the opening of Gutai Art on Stage with his own avant-garde consecration. In a ritualistic act that, according to Alexandra Munroe, “both parodied and embodied drama’s sacred dimension” Shiraga appropriated traditional imagery in the “shocking new context” of an experimental art festival.<sup>97</sup> Channeling a similar setup as Tanaka, Shiraga emerged alone on stage, wearing a pointed hat and a theatrical costume of the same bold, blood-red color prominently featured in many of his action paintings. Unlike Tanaka, however, Shiraga’s performance was defined by

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<sup>96</sup> Tiampo, “Electrifying Painting,” in *Electrifying Art*, 74.

<sup>97</sup> Munroe, 197.

dramatic gestures and movements, also typical of his more physical performances, that exaggerated the length of his wing-like sleeves, slashing the stage with scarlet lines—a painting in motion.

Performed one year after *Electric Dress* and coinciding with Tanaka's *Stage Clothes* performance, Shiraga's work shares an affinity with Tanaka's own provocative garments, not only for its emphasis on colorful, wearable forms that draw the eye, but for its ability to energize traditional practices and redefine them in unconventional ways that charted new territory for postwar Japanese art. In the aftermath of *Electric Dress*, it is nearly impossible to discuss Shiraga's costume without invoking Tanaka, a testament to the power of her work—indelible to the eyes and to the senses—and its life beyond the original performance.

### **Exhibiting *Electric Dress***

Considering the significance of sensory experience in the original performance of *Electric Dress*, its later display in museums and special exhibitions since the 1950s must also be considered as part of the object's history. The following section will explore how museums have chosen to display the reconstructed form of *Electric Dress* in recent exhibitions and how these installation decisions differ from the original conditions of the work's performance.

Since the mid-1950s, several exhibitions have included Tanaka's multimedia and performance works, both in solo exhibitions and retrospectives of Gutai. For North American audiences, a reconstructed version of *Electric Dress* first traveled to Los Angeles in 1998 for *Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object, 1949-1979*. Commenting on the loss of the performance's initial experiential encounter, one reviewer rued: "It was hard to resist the envy and regret of not being present for 'The Second Outdoor Gutai Exhibition' in Tokyo in 1956,

when Gutai member Atsuko Tanaka first performed in her brilliant electric dress (in the exhibition it is accompanied by a group of magical little drawings that give the viewer some idea of Tanaka's light body)."<sup>98</sup> The critic ultimately concludes that much of the intent behind these objects, including Tanaka's, are lost, as it is "the drawings, sculptures, photographs, and texts that remain to conjure a history, narrative, and myth about prophetic artistry."<sup>99</sup>

Most recently, Tanaka's *Electric Dress* has been displayed at *Gutai: Splendid Playground* at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York in 2013 (fig. 18). The exhibition was co-curated by art historian Ming Tiampo and Alexandra Munroe, Samsung Senior Curator of Asian Art at the Guggenheim. Munroe previously played a significant role in introducing North American audiences to Gutai in her landmark exhibition *Japanese Art After 1945: Scream Against the Sky* held at the Yokohama Museum of Art, the Guggenheim New York, and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1994. The title for the 2013 exhibition's title comes from Shiraga's text "The Establishment of the Individual," (1956) in which the artist claimed that the world was "a splendid playground."<sup>100</sup> That spirit of creativity, so important to the Gutai artists, is channeled in the curators' efforts, as Namiko Kunimoto argued in a review for *Art Journal*:

Too often, contemporary American and Japanese critics have seen Gutai as indulging in whimsy without understanding the group's actions as a critical strategy for moving beyond the imperialist rhetoric of the past. To this end, the exhibition might have benefited from a greater contextualization of the historical and political background to Gutai's work. Certainly for most viewers, *Splendid Playground*'s emphasis on whimsical spectacle and levity prevails.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> M.A. Greenstein, "The Act and the Object," *Art Journal* 57, no. 3 (Autumn 1998): 86-87.

<sup>99</sup> Greenstein, 87.

<sup>100</sup> Kazuo Shiraga, "The Establishment of the Individual," in *Gutai: Splendid Playground*, 279. Originally published as "Kotai no kakuritsu," *Gutai* 4 (July 1956): 6-7.

<sup>101</sup> Namiko Kunimoto, "Gutai's Ascent," *Art Journal* 72, no. 2 (Summer 2013): 115-116.

The exhibition's curators established a tone of playful irreverence with the introductory panel, which invited viewers to "Come out and Play." One of the first opportunities to do so took form in Tanaka's *Work (Bell)*. On a ramp above the lobby floor, viewers were invited to approach a small white box on a pedestal and instructed to "Please push this button." Immediately Tanaka's *Work (Bell)* was set in motion, activating the ringing bells that ran up the ramp of the Guggenheim's building. According to one reviewer, "It raced halfway up and around the ramp and then back down again. The annoying racket was a real disturbance and the perpetrator, standing sheepishly at the box with its come-on sign, identifiable."<sup>102</sup> As this critic points out, Tanaka's *Work (Bell)* still carried with it the potential for provocation as the bells disrupted the silence typically associated with museum spaces. Continuing Kunimoto's critique of the exhibition's historical sidelining, however, the tone of playful subversion adopted by the curators seems like a missed opportunity to discuss the social and political reverberations of Tanaka's participatory, noise-making machine in the immediate post-Occupation years.

Reactions to the installation of *Electric Dress at Gutai: Splendid Playground*, on the other hand, were mixed. One reviewer praised the work for still maintaining its powerful presence sixty years after its original performance:

Performance does not aspire, in the greedy manner of much Western art, to immortality. Even so, a very few works of performance art transcend their own fleeting nature, capturing in definitive form something important about modern culture. Atsuko Tanaka's *Electric Dress*, which she made for a performance in 1956, is a work with this iconic power.<sup>103</sup>

Yet another critic in *Art in America* claimed that "her landmark *Electric Dress* is a

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<sup>102</sup> Susan G. Lewis, "Gutai at the Guggenheim," *Impressions* 35 (2014): 260.

<sup>103</sup> Mark Stevens, "Everything is Illuminated," *New York*, October 4, 2004, <http://nymag.com/nymag/critics/art/9937/>.

disappointment here—not even mounted on a mannequin to suggest its performance aspect.”<sup>104</sup>

Commenting on the anemic visual quality of the work, another reviewer wrote: “Tanaka Atsuko's still outlandish *Electric Dress* does not reveal surprises to me with each viewing. Instead, it is the artist's creativity and brashness to conceive of such a thing that is the beautiful point for me.”<sup>105</sup> Hanging empty in the bright white space of the museum, the static, reconstructed version of *Electric Dress* has understandably lost the experiential and animated qualities that made it so compelling in its original form.

The appearance of a reconstructed *Electric Dress* highlights a popular trend in contemporary museum practices. In their *Artforum* article “The Year in ‘Re-,’” Martha Buskirk, Amelia Jones, and Caroline A. Jones consider the popularity of reconstructions, reenactments, and other representations of postwar art in museums throughout the last decade. *Gutai: Splendid Playground* serves as one of their primary case studies, particularly through their definition of reconstruction:

The term usually implies consultation of original plans, scripts, photographs, or surviving fragments, but increasingly it points to an ambiguous territory between material artworks reassembled, repaired, or remade as objects, and ephemeral actions performed by live bodies or machines. Many of the large-scale Gutai works at the Guggenheim were commonly referred to as “reconstructed” (a condition often silently reflected in the ‘/2013’ added to historical dates on the museum's wall labels). However, in the exhibition catalogue, the curators refer to the pieces as “new commissions, not reconstructions”—even if they describe a process in which the living artists included in the show had to “reimagine” or “rethink” historical works for the new setting.<sup>106</sup>

The “ambiguous territory” between reconstructions and their original “ephemeral actions” underscores the importance of the body in Tanaka’s work, so noticeably missing in its

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<sup>104</sup> Janet Koplos, “Gutai: Splendid Playground,” *Art in America* 101, no. 4 (April 2013): 110.

<sup>105</sup> Lewis, 273.

<sup>106</sup> Martha Buskirk, Amelia Jones, and Caroline A. Jones, “The Year in Re-,” *Artforum International* 52, no. 4 (December 2013): 127.

reproduced form. As Peggy Phelan claims, “Performance implicates the real through the presence of living bodies.”<sup>107</sup> The human form at the center of *Electric Dress* throws into sharp relief the beauty and the risk inherent in the piece. Without the vulnerable human body inside, the tension of the work’s social and psychological elements are drastically reduced.

So too are the work’s political dimensions. In her first exhibition on Gutai artists, Alexandra Munroe claimed that artists like Tanaka were driven by an escapist tendency, one “spurred by the contemporary euphoria of political, social, and economic liberation from Japan’s dark wartime past.” As Tanaka’s *Electric Dress* shows though, visual beauty and psychic shock intermingle in their address of previously suppressed wartime visuals and postwar trauma. It is this quality of Tanaka’s work that illustrates Phelan’s claim that, “Just as we understand that things in the past determine how we experience the present, so too can it be said that the visible is defined by the invisible.”<sup>108</sup> While this chapter interprets Tanaka’s performance in light of the social, cultural, and political circumstances of her time, it also does not entirely do away with a close formal reading of her work’s aesthetic qualities. By approaching her work as a manifestation of both traumatic and sublime encounters, this chapter proposes Tanaka’s *Electric Dress*—and the sensory experiences it is capable of producing—as a powerful vehicle for wartime representation and remembrance.

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<sup>107</sup> Phelan, 148.

<sup>108</sup> Phelan, 14.

## Ch. 2: Revolution in Motion? Hélio Oiticica's *Parangolés*

*Popular imagination, encountering life in all its totality. It is the people who create. African cults and rituals, myths and tribal meaning, the revolt, the dance, Mangueira, its samba dancers, the parangolé capes. The act of wearing them incorporates everything: the sensorial, the playful, the environmental, tropical culture, the synthesis.*  
– Hélio Oiticica, *Apocalipópotese*

Appearing in Brazilian director Raimundo Amado's *Apocalipópotese* (1968), the preceding words are intoned over images of dancers taking their turn in the center of a dense crowd of people. The dancers perform the complex and improvisational movements of samba, a polyrhythmic musical genre incorporating African dance that would become a contested symbol of Brazilian national identity by the mid-twentieth century. As they move to the music's syncopated rhythms, the dancers reveal the multi-colored layers of the unusual garments they wear (figs. 19-21). Filmed at Rio de Janeiro's Atêrro do Flamengo park, Amado's film features participants wearing the *parangolés* of Brazilian artist Hélio Oiticica. These unconventional garments consisted of brightly colored banners, tents and capes composed of layered plastic and cloth. Some included photographs or texts inspired by those who wore them, and several were named after Oiticica's close friends or cultural icons. All of the *parangolés* were intended to be set in motion by those who wore them. As Oiticica's words suggest, the *parangolé* belonged to a larger system of creation, transformation, and synthesis. For Oiticica, the act of wearing this garment, created from the materials of urban Rio de Janeiro and worn primarily by its Afro-Brazilian residents, created the possibility of dissolving the very boundaries between life and art.

The performance at Atêrro do Flamengo occurred nearly three years after Oiticica first publicly debuted the *parangolé* in 1965 at the Museu de Arte Moderna, approximately a mile from the park. Unlike the liberating tone Amado's film strikes, the *parangolés* and

accompanying samba performance at the museum would create a more volatile encounter. The event is well documented in the extensive literature on Oiticica, but bears recounting here.

On August 12, 1965, Oiticica and several dancers from the Escola de Samba Estação Primeira da Mangueira arrived at the *Opinião 65* (Opinion 65) exhibition at the Museu de Arte Moderna in Rio de Janeiro. Along with the school's *passistas*, or lead dancers, Oiticica planned to stage the first public performance of his *parangolés*, which were intended to unite the materials and bodies of the urban poor with the museum's inner sanctum of rarified culture in a swirling field of color and motion (fig. 22). The dynamic samba movements of the Mangueira dancers, many of whom were the artist's friends as well as collaborators, were intended to energize the museum and create what the artist referred to as the "*Parangolé* total-experience."<sup>109</sup> Oiticica and his friends arrived in a carnivalesque procession of music and movement, expecting to inhabit the museum with their samba rhythms. The original performance, however, was never fully realized. Alarmed by the approaching sound and sight of the *sambistas*, primarily composed of dark-skinned dancers of the Brazilian underclass, the museum director refused entrance to Oiticica.<sup>110</sup> Undaunted, the artist and his collaborators continued to perform outside of the Museu de Arte Moderna. The *Opinião 65* performance launched the *parangolé* to near mythic status, which continues today in scholarly literature, as a radically new form of symbolic armor used against suppressive institutional forces. Writing a year after the performance, the artist remarked that the *parangolés* became the "most complete

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<sup>109</sup> Hélio Oiticica, "Notes on the *Parangolé*," in *Hélio Oiticica*, ed. Guy Brett (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1992), 96. Originally published by the artist as "Anotações sobre o Parangolé" in 1965 for the *Opinião 65* exhibition at the Museu de Arte Moderna, Rio de Janeiro.

<sup>110</sup> A similar occurrence took place in 1994, after Oiticica's death, at the São Paulo Biennial, when curator Wim Beeren kicked out Mangueira dancers wearing Oiticica's *Parangolés*. See Luciano Figueredo's remarks in "The Other Malady," *Third Text* 8, nos. 28-29 (1994): 105-116.



expression of...environmental anti-art” and a “fatal blow to the concept of the museum, art gallery, etc., and to the very concept of ‘exhibition.’”<sup>111</sup>

The *Opinião 65* performance has since been framed as an event that epitomized the artist’s challenge not only to the bourgeois space of the museum, but also to the increasingly repressive political conditions in Brazil. The *parangolés* were created in the same year that a military coup deposed President João Goulart and dismantled the Centros Popular de Cultura (Centers for Popular Culture), or CPCs, of the leftist national student union.<sup>112</sup> Under the military dictatorship that would control the country from 1964-1985, artists lived under the continual threat of censorship, violence and imprisonment. By 1968, the military regime had passed Institutional Act no. 5 (AI-5), a mandate that took direct aim at Brazilian artists, intellectuals, and left-wing politicians. In addition to suspending constitutional guarantees that safeguarded these citizens’ civil and political rights, AI-5 enacted a culture of self-censorship amongst artists who feared retaliation by the regime.<sup>113</sup> During the AI-5 years, exhibitions were regularly censored or prohibited from opening, popular musicians such as Caetano Veloso and Gilberto Gil would be imprisoned for supporting political dissent in their performances, and in several highly publicized incidents, artists and youth activists were detained or killed by military police.<sup>114</sup> The regime’s violent and repressive actions of the late 1960s would eventually lead

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<sup>111</sup> Oiticica, “Position and Program,” in *Hélio Oiticica*, 103-104. Originally written in July 1966.

<sup>112</sup> Irene Small, *Hélio Oiticica: Folding the Frame* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 184.

<sup>113</sup> AI-5 was enacted on December 13, 1968 and officially revoked in December 31, 1978. See Claudia Calirman, *Brazilian Art Under Dictatorship: Antonio Manuel, Artur Barrio, and Cildo Meireles* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 150-158.

<sup>114</sup> Monica Amor and Carlos Basualdo, “Hélio Oiticica, *Apocalipópótese* (1968),” *Mousse* 49, no. 8 (July 2015): 12. These incidents include the death of Édson Luis de Lima Souto, a 16-year old student and activist who was killed in confrontation with military police on March 28, 1968, and in the following month, the imprisonment and torture of Rogério Duarte, a celebrated graphic designer and musician.

Oiticica and other artists into voluntary exile.<sup>115</sup>

Oiticica produced his first *parangolé* in 1964, a year that marked several significant national and biographical touchstones in his life. In addition to coinciding with the rise of Brazil's military dictatorship, the *parangolés* also emerged after his first visit to the Mangueira favela shantytown, where he became absorbed in samba culture. It was at the favela that Oiticica first saw the word *parangolé*, a slang term derived from situational happenings, including anything from pointless conversations to unexpected encounters, on a piece of burlap that formed the wall of a favela shack.<sup>116</sup> The gritty, urban reality of the favelas spurred the artist to create artworks that originated from and reflected upon their social environment in meaningful ways. For Oiticica, his visit to the Mangueira favela in 1964 precipitated a departure from conventional painting and sculpture, a process he had already initiated with his involvement in the Brazilian Neo-Concrete movement (1959-61). Rather than a two-dimensional surface, the *parangolé* was intended to be activated by the gestures and movements of the body that wore it and also the participants who watched the performance unfold. For Oiticica, the *parangolé* initiated an entire system of body, object, and environment integration.

*The act of wearing them incorporates everything.* As the opening quote poetically suggests, Oiticica conceived of the *parangolé* as an artistic vehicle used to unite the materials, structures, and bodies of urban Brazil. This chapter uses Oiticica's appellation of the *parangolés* as a "synthesis" as a conceptual point of departure for considering the interrelationships between audience participation, sensory experience, and political engagement in the performance of the

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<sup>115</sup> Oiticica left Brazil for London in 1969. He lived in New York from 1970 to 1978, where he expanded his creative output to include filmmaking, photography, poetry, and prose. He would return to Rio de Janeiro in 1978, where he remained until his death in 1980.

<sup>116</sup> Monica Amor, *Theories of the Nonobject: Argentina, Brazil, Venezuela* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), 139. Other definitions include insincere banter, bragging, idle chatter, or a confusing and exciting situation.

*parangolés*. However, this chapter also questions the notion of synthesis advanced by Oiticica, particularly in the elements of Oiticica's performance that have not emerged in scholarly narratives of the *parangolé* as either social unifier, on one hand, or armor of resistance, on the other. Rather than exploring how different cultural forms seamlessly merge and unify in Oiticica's artistic program, this chapter addresses the conflicts elided by Oiticica's use of the word "synthesis," particularly with his incorporation of the embattled cultural form of samba into the *parangolé* performances.

While Oiticica's development of the *parangolé* in the social context of Mangueira has been touched on in most scholarly treatments of the artist's larger body of work, little consideration has been given to the *parangolés* in relation to other favela-derived forms of cultural expression utilized in the uperformance—namely, the racialized history of samba and its cultural context in 1960s Brazil. To counter the prevailing academic trend of adopting Oiticica's views of the *parangolés* in a way that sidesteps discussion of other important forms of cultural expression displayed in his performances, I make samba a focal point in my analysis. This reframing attempts a better understanding of the complex and ambivalent expressions of resistance that emerged during the *Opinião 65* performance, especially through the participation of the Afro-Brazilian *sambistas* who wore the *parangolés*. By focusing on each element of the performance, we might come to a more fully realized understanding of the performance's reception, as well as the politicized elements of samba dance, *tropicália*, and other artistic forms that Oiticica drew upon for his performances and, in turn, helped to shape.

I begin this chapter by describing two distinct performances as a way to set the stage for a larger consideration of the *parangolés'* performance dynamics and public reception. Both performances featured Oiticica's garments set in motion to samba, yet their locations and

reactions from the audience differed dramatically. While the *Opinião 65* performance entailed a moment of dramatic exclusion for its participants, the second event, occurring in a public space outside of the museum, produced a more receptive, collaborative reaction.<sup>117</sup> What changed between the two performances? And how are the *parangolés* experienced today, in the context of the museums in which they are displayed? Peggy Phelan's views on performance art emphasize its capacity to uphold "the idea that a limited number of people in a specific time/space frame can have an experience of value which leaves no visible trace afterward."<sup>118</sup> For Phelan, the disappearance of the object is fundamental to the immediacy of the performance, as it "rehearses and repeats the disappearance of the subject who longs always to be remembered."<sup>119</sup> This chapter considers the continued afterlife of Oiticica's *parangolés* in the context of twenty-first century American museums, a setting in which they are still activated by viewers in an alternative performance context. In order to understand the full impact of the *parangolé* in its original and present-day social and cultural environments, this chapter traces the path of Oiticica's career from its beginning stages to the creation of his first wearable object in 1964, the politically charged 1965 performance at the Museu de Arte Moderna, and the later iterations of the *parangolés* on display in contemporary exhibitions.

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<sup>117</sup> Amor and Basualdo, 12. The authors further discuss the collaborative dynamics of the entire event. They continue: "Aside from his own capes—*Caetelesvelásia* (an homage to the singer Caetano Veloso), *Guevaluta*, *Guevarcália*, *Nirvana*, and *Xoxôba* (an homage to Nininha de Mangureira)—Oiticica realized two with [Rogério] Duarte: *Urnarnorna* and a poem-cape. Lygia Pape, appropriating Oiticica's invention and in his honor, realized a cape entitled *Capélio* made of multiple textures and colors that produced sound while worn and in movement. Pape's eggs also involved the *sambistas*, as several of them demonstrated for the audience how to interact with these structures. Covered with colored paper, several cubes were penetrated and broken through so as to invoke the act of creation." The authors make reference to Pape's *Trio do embalo maluco* (Crazy Rocking Trio), a series began in 1968 and performed in *Apocalipopótese*. Pape created egg-like forms wrapped in white, blue, and red paper. The eggs could be entered by participants and broken through to mimic the act of birth.

<sup>118</sup> Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993), 149.

<sup>119</sup> Phelan, 147.

## Review of Literature and Critical Interpretations of the *Parangolés*

Scholarly literature and exhibitions featuring Oiticica's work have blossomed since the 1990s. After his first international retrospective in 1992, co-organized by the Galerie Nationale du Jeu de Paume in Paris, Witte de With in Rotterdam, and the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, Oiticica's reputation as one of the most innovative and prolific Brazilian artists was thoroughly established for American and European audiences. His work later appeared in Documenta X, curated by Catherine David in 1997, and in two surveys, including *Hélio Oiticica: The Body of Color*, organized by the Tate in London and the Museum of Fine Arts Houston, and, most recently, *Hélio Oiticica: To Organize Delirium*, which was co-organized by the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh, the Art Institute of Chicago and the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York.<sup>120</sup> The 2012 biographical film *Hélio Oiticica*, directed by the artist's nephew Cesar Oiticica Filho and featuring archival footage of Oiticica at various stages of his life and career, has further expanded the artist's international visibility.

Dissertations and monographs on the artist have also increased in a second generation of scholars exploring Oiticica's art. Most recently, art historian Irene Small's *Hélio Oiticica: Folding the Frame* (2016) and Michael Asbury's dissertation "Hélio Oiticica: Politics and Ambivalence in Twentieth-Century Brazilian Art" (2003) offer new interpretations of Oiticica's work.<sup>121</sup> Small's major monograph reframes Oiticica's art within a new narrative driven by social participation rather than aesthetics, while Asbury explores the origins of Oiticica's

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<sup>120</sup> See *Hélio Oiticica: The Body of Color*, ed. Mari Carmen Ramirez (London: Tate, 2007) and *Hélio Oiticica: To Organize Delirium*, ed. Lynn Zelevansky (Munich: Prestel, 2016). Other major shows include *Hélio Oiticica: Propositions* (2014) at the Irish Museum of Modern Art and *Hélio Oiticica: Quasi-Cinemas* (2001-2002) at the New Museum of Contemporary Art.

<sup>121</sup> See Irene Small, *Hélio Oiticica: Folding the Frame* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016) and Michael Asbury, "Hélio Oiticica: Politics and Ambivalence in Twentieth-Century Brazilian Art" (PhD diss., University of the Arts London, 2003), <http://www2.lib.ku.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.www2.lib.ku.edu/docview/301612157?accountid=14556>.

political and philosophical ideas prior to the emergence of the *parangolé*. An extensive number of articles, essays, and chapters detailing the artist's creative output have each added new dimensions to our understanding of Oiticica's career, with connections to fields as wide ranging as history, politics, philosophy, psychology, architecture and urban planning.<sup>122</sup>

Those who have written about the *parangolés*, and the Museu de Arte Moderna performance specifically, have tended to evaluate them in decidedly political terms, an interpretation that follows the Brazilian art critic and historian Mário Pedrosa's characterization of Oiticica's practice as an "experimental exercise in freedom" within the repressive political climate of 1960s Brazil.<sup>123</sup> In the initial period of military rule in the 1960s, art exhibitions sympathetic to leftist politics, particularly the Marxist ideas of Che Guevara, were banned, while curators, writers and intellectuals, including Pedrosa, were forced to leave the country.<sup>124</sup> Although artists were not usually directly targeted, the pervasive fear of disciplinary action, exile, and censorship limited artists in terms of the social statements they might make.<sup>125</sup>

Art historian and curator Martino Stierli is one scholar who interprets the *parangolés* in light of Brazil's repressive political circumstances. In the edited volume *Participation in Art and Architecture: Spaces of Interaction and Occupation*, Stierli writes:

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<sup>122</sup> To name a few, see Simone Osthoff's "Hélio Oiticica's *Parangolés*, Nomadic Experience in Endless Motion," in *Diaspora and Visual Culture: Representing Africans and Jews*, ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff (London: Routledge, 2000), 224-240; Paula Braga, "Hélio Oiticica and the *Parangolés*: (Ad)dressing Nietzsche's *Übermensch*," *Third Text* 17, no. 1 (2003): 43-52; Martino Stierli "Aesthetics and Politics of Participation in 1960s Brazil: From Hélio Oiticica's *Parangolés* to the Paulista School of Architecture," in *Participation in Art and Architecture: Spaces of Interaction and Occupation*, eds. Martino Stierli and Mechtild Widrich (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016), 64-88.

<sup>123</sup> The phrase "*o exercício experimental da liberdade*" first appeared in Pedrosa's 1967 article "O 'bicho-da-seda' na produção em massa." This phrase appears several times in Oiticica's own writing, including "Appearance of the Supra-Sensorial," *Hélio Oiticica*, 127, originally written in November or December, 1967.

<sup>124</sup> Calirman, 18.

<sup>125</sup> Calirman, 21.

What became increasingly decisive for the *Parangolés* performances in the artist's conception was not only the notion of 'bodily participation' on part of the observer/actor, but the social dimension of the *Parangolé* performances; these events interacted with public urban space as well as with their audiences, inviting the latter to collectively participate. The *Parangolés* were thus essentially political in nature.<sup>126</sup>

As Stierli argues, Oiticica's participatory turn with the *parangolés* demonstrated their importance as a social material that signified emancipation and empowerment for their wearers.<sup>127</sup> The socio-economic and racial position of Oiticica's performers proves particularly important in considering their presence in the performance. Certainly the appearance of the city's favela dwellers occupying the elite space of Rio's modern art museum called attention to the city's racial and socioeconomic disparities between the largely white bourgeoisie and the poor urban classes inhabiting the favelas, who made up a third of Rio de Janeiro's population.<sup>128</sup>

Other scholars have challenged the political interpretation of Oiticica's *parangolés* and their relationship to the emerging Brazilian military dictatorship. Art historian Irene Small believes the notion of the *parangolé* performance as protest perpetuates the myth of Oiticica's practice as a reactionary one, responding suddenly to restrictive social conditions. She instead interprets the performance as a "product of rigorous interpolation between multiple systems of meaning" including the politics of the Brazilian avant-garde, whose members had increasingly aligned their artistic practices with leftist politics prior to the military coup of 1964.<sup>129</sup> Other scholars have similarly examined the "polysemic character" of the *parangolé*, a term Renato Rodrigues Da Silva uses in his semiotic analysis of the garments' transgressive qualities, which

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<sup>126</sup> Stierli, 72.

<sup>127</sup> Stierli, 73.

<sup>128</sup> Amor, *Theories of the Nonobject*, 154.

<sup>129</sup> Small, *Folding the Frame*, 16-17. See also Small's discussion of the politicization of Brazilian avant-garde artists and writers, especially through the writings of Ferreira Gullar, in "Exit and Impasse: Ferreira Gullar and the 'New History' of the Last Avant-Garde," *Third Text* 26, no. 1 (Jan. 2012): 91-101.

he extends to their constant negotiations between interior and exterior, masculine and feminine, spectator and participant.<sup>130</sup> The ability to produce “pairs of contraries,” according to Da Silva, enabled the artist to highlight social problems in modern Brazilian society, including rigid divisions concerning gender, class and sexual identities, while conceiving the means of overcoming them.<sup>131</sup> Art historian Anna Dezeuze accurately describes the complicated connection between art and the social and political environment of Rio de Janeiro with the following insight: “While it seems impossible to dissociate the *parangolés* from the context in which they were produced, the exact nature of their political dimension is difficult to describe.”<sup>132</sup>

Far from being a symbol of either political resistance or aesthetic expression, the *parangolé* was intended as a synthesis of the two and more. To return to Oiticica’s quote at the beginning of the chapter, “The act of wearing them incorporates everything: the sensorial, the playful, the environmental, tropical culture, the synthesis.” The following pages will explore the concept of synthesis in Oiticica’s practice, paying particular attention to the term’s associations with assimilation, within the political and cultural environment of 1960s Brazil.

### **Oiticica’s Early Life and Artistic Influences**

Hélio Oiticica was born into a middle-class family in Rio de Janeiro’s Botafogo neighborhood on July 26, 1937 to José Oiticica Filho (1906-1964) and Angela Santos Oiticica

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<sup>130</sup> Renato Rodrigues Da Silva, “Hélio Oiticica's *Parangolé* or the Art of Transgression,” *Third Text* 19, no. 3 (May 2005): 217.

<sup>131</sup> Da Silva, 217.

<sup>132</sup> Anna Dezeuze, “Tactile Dematerialization, Sensory Politics: Hélio Oiticica's *Parangolés*,” *Art Journal* 63, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 60.



(1903-1972). Oiticica grew up in a family of researchers, artists and revolutionaries. His grandfather, José Oiticica, was a recognized Brazilian anarchist, philologist, writer and founder of the Colegio Latino-americano in Rio de Janeiro.<sup>133</sup> His father, José Oiticica Filho, an entomologist and experimental photographer, worked at the Natural History Museum, where Oiticica himself held a position during his early twenties.<sup>134</sup> These relationships helped foster Oiticica's meticulous nature and abundant creative energies, evidenced by the prolific number of artistic experiments and writings on the visual arts over the course of his career.

Oiticica began his formal artistic training by studying painting and drawing at the Museu de Arte Moderna in Rio in 1954. His early interest in color and abstraction were guided by his teacher Ivan Serpa (1923-1973), founder of the Grupo Frente. Oiticica fell in with this group in 1955 and began studying modern art, particularly examples of European geometric abstraction.<sup>135</sup> During this period, Oiticica created his *Metaesquema* series (1957-1958) of grid-based compositions consisting of monochromatic rectangles (fig. 23). Such paintings reveal the artist's attraction to the colorful forms and geometric compositions of European modernist painters like Piet Mondrian, Kasimir Malevich, and Paul Klee.

Above all else, members of the Grupo Frente shared a desire for color to animate the pictorial surface. Color would continue to be an essential element for Oiticica even after the group disbanded in 1956. Writing in 1960, Oiticica called it "the very axis of what I do, the

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<sup>133</sup> Irene Small, "Morphology in the Studio: Hélio Oiticica at the Museu Nacional," *Getty Research Journal* no. 1 (2009): n. 5. For a discussion of the Colegio Latino-americano, see Nuria Enguita Mayo, "Foreword," *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context, and Enquiry* 28 (Autumn/Winter 2011): 2.

<sup>134</sup> See also Irene Small's "Morphology in the Studio" for a detailed examination of Oiticica's art in relation to a taxonomic structure.

<sup>135</sup> Stacey Boldrick, *Possibilities of the Object: Experiments in Modern and Contemporary Brazilian Art* (Edinburgh: Fruit Market Gallery, 2015), 110.

starting point of every work.”<sup>136</sup> He continues:

Color is one of the work’s dimensions. It is inseparable from the phenomenon as a whole, from structure, from space and from time but, like those three, it is a distinct, dialectic element, one of the dimensions. It therefore possesses its own elementary progression, for it is the very nucleus of painting, its reason for being. However, when color is no longer submitted to the rectangle, nor to any representation of this rectangle, it tends to “embody” itself; it becomes temporal, it creates its own structure, and the work then becomes the “body of color.”<sup>137</sup>

The connection Oiticica draws between color and embodiment underscores his ongoing interest in the writings of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, a fascination he shared with other members of Grupo Frente. Merleau-Ponty’s influential texts on phenomenology, including *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), advanced the central role of the body, as opposed to the mind, in interpreting one’s perception of reality.<sup>138</sup> Merleau-Ponty’s writings provided a significant theoretical framework for Oiticica and his colleagues to examine perceptions of the world through bodily experience, as he would most fully explore in the *parangolé* performances. Merleau-Ponty’s writings are directly invoked in several of Oiticica’s texts, most notably in his 1960 essay “Color, Time, and Structure,” in which the artist writes: “The genesis of the work of art is to such a degree connected to and experienced by the artist that it is no longer possible to separate matter from spirit, because, as Merleau-Ponty points out, matter and spirit are dialectics of a single phenomenon.”<sup>139</sup> Oiticica also discusses the phenomenological concept of “lived experience [*vivência*]” to theorize color as a fundamental vehicle of meaning in art.<sup>140</sup> Color

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<sup>136</sup> Oiticica in Brett, *Helio Oiticica*, 33. Originally written in a diary entry on October 5, 1960.

<sup>137</sup> Oiticica in Brett, *Helio Oiticica*, 33

<sup>138</sup> See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 1962).

<sup>139</sup> Hélio Oiticica, “Colour, Time, and Structure,” in *Painting at the Edge of the World*, ed. Douglas Fogle (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2001), 116.

<sup>140</sup> Oiticica, “Colour, Time, and Structure,” 116.

becomes a vital aspect of Oiticica's works, and will be explored in greater detail in the following examples.

Oiticica left the Grupo Frente in 1959 in order to cofound the Neoconcrete Group with artists Lygia Clark, Lygia Pape, Franz Weissmann, and Ferreira Gullar. Inspired by Merleau-Ponty's belief that "it is by lending his body to the world that the artist changes the world into paintings," the Neoconcretists began to move away from a visually oriented art experience as they investigated time, movement and participation in their artworks.<sup>141</sup> While working with this group, Oiticica developed his first works that directly engaged viewer participation. His *Penetrable* series, begun in 1960, emphasized a more architectural and experiential model for viewers. His first work in the series, entitled *PN1 Penetrable* (1960), consisted of several wood surfaces painted in bright yellow and orange hues arranged in a semi-open, room-like structure (fig. 24). Viewers could move the interior walls and manipulate their own experience of the work's spatial configuration and colors.<sup>142</sup> Thus the *Penetrable* works were effectively experienced anew each time a viewer moved through their interiors.

In addition to the influence of Merleau-Ponty, Oiticica's experimentations were also shaped by the writings of several key theorists who championed progressive Brazilian art of the 1960s. The theorists and writers whose works influenced Oiticica and the Neoconcretists the most included art critic Mário Pedrosa, who would famously coin the term "post-modernity" in 1966, and art critic Ferreira Gullar, whose 1959 essay "Teoria do Não Objeto" (Theory of the Non-Object) helped define the underlying concerns of many Neoconcretist artists. Gullar

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<sup>141</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," in *The Primacy of Perception*, ed. James E. Edie, trans. Carleton Dallery (1961; repr., Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 162.

<sup>142</sup> Although Oiticica's *Penetrables* are still exhibited regularly, many of them are now too fragile for visitors to enter and touch. *PN1 Penetrable* was exhibited at the recent retrospective *Hélio Oiticica: To Organize Delirium* at its three venues, the Carnegie Museum of Art, Art Institute of Chicago, and the Whitney Museum of American Art, but it remained inaccessible to viewers through touch.

composed his essay after being unable to classify the works of Lygia Clark, a fellow Neoconcretist artist and friend of Oiticica, whose art did not fit into established categories like painting or sculpture. In his essay, Gullar defined the “non-object” in the following terms: “The non-object is not an anti-object but a special object destined to hold a synthesis of sensory and mental experiments: a body entirely permeable to phenomenological knowledge, a totally discernible body that exposes itself thoroughly to perception.”<sup>143</sup> Rather than defining the production and reception of this new kind of art in aesthetic terms, Gullar’s essay articulated the experience of art as most fully felt in the interaction between body, object, and environment.

“Theory of the Non-Object” would anticipate major theoretical debates that emerged in American avant-garde art during the early 1960s, perhaps most notably laid out in Donald Judd’s 1965 essay “Specific Objects.” Like Gullar, Judd acknowledges that new vocabulary must be created for new works, calling them “special objects—non-objects—for which the denominations painting and sculpture perhaps no longer apply.”<sup>144</sup> Both writers employ a phenomenological approach in describing one’s experience with this new category of art object and the space it occupies.<sup>145</sup> The similarities between the two texts suggest that Judd arrived at many of the same conclusions that Gullar had more than five years earlier. However, both essays developed in relation to the artistic traditions and cultural contexts of the United States and Brazil, respectively.

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<sup>143</sup> Ferreira Gullar, “Theory of the Non-Object” (*Teoria do Não Objeto*), in *Cosmopolitan Modernisms*, trans. Michael Asbury and ed. Kobena Mercer (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 170. Originally published in *Jornal do Brasil*, December 19-20, 1959.

<sup>144</sup> Donald Judd, “Specific Objects,” in *Art in Theory: 1900–1990, An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 809. Originally published in *Arts Yearbook* 8 (1965): 74-82.

<sup>145</sup> For more analysis of Judd’s and Gullar’s writings within a larger theoretical discussion of both Neoconcretism and Minimalism, see Michael Asbury’s “Neoconcretism and Minimalism: Cosmopolitanism at a Local Level and a Canonical Provincialism,” in Mercer, *Cosmopolitan Modernisms*, 174-189.

After his involvement with the Neoconcrete group, the pursuit of viewer participation would continue in Oiticica's *Bólides* (1963-67), a series consisting of boxes with compartments that could be opened or closed (fig. 25). Oiticica used the evocative term *bólides*—an astronomical designation for exploding meteors that emit light and energy into the atmosphere—to describe the brilliantly colored boxes, many of which contained raw pigments.<sup>146</sup> Visitors were able to experience different sensations by opening and closing the object's compartments, manipulating its position, and touching the enclosed materials. Like the *Penetrables*, the *Bólides* transformed the observer into an active participant, and the artwork from a fixed object into a device for new perceptual and sensory encounters. The *Bólides* furthered Oiticica's project of making color a more physical substance one must experience phenomenologically, rather than a mere vehicle for painting on canvas. Commenting on the use of color in Oiticica's *Penetrables* and *Bólides*, Mário Pedrosa would write the following in 1966: "Colour became invasive, one could feel its physical presence, reflect upon it, touch it stand on it, breath[e] it."<sup>147</sup>

In his discussion of color, Pedrosa further connected Oiticica's works with the phenomenological projects of Lygia Clark, noting that within both artists' works "the spectator abandons passive contemplation, becoming attracted to an action that lies beyond his conventional considerations as he moves into the field of interest of the artist."<sup>148</sup> In the late 1950s, Oiticica developed a close relationship with Clark, whom he had met in the Neoconcrete circle of artists. Their works shared a similar goal of emphasizing the centrality of the body in

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<sup>146</sup> Small, *Hélio Oiticica: Folding the Frame*, 153.

<sup>147</sup> Mário Pedrosa, "Environmental Art, Postmodern Art: Hélio Oiticica," in *Open Systems: Rethinking Art c. 1970*, ed. Donna De Salvo, trans. Michael Asbury (London, Tate: 2005), 182. Originally published as "Arte ambiental, arte pós-moderna, Hélio Oiticica" in *Correio da Manhã*, June 26, 1966.

<sup>148</sup> Pedrosa, 182.

artistic experience, and they would even collaborate on projects.<sup>149</sup> As Simone Osthoff has pointed out, in comparison with Clark's frequent stimulation of the body to tap into internal, psychological states, perhaps best illustrated in her "relational objects" used to promote emotional healing through the sense of touch, Oiticica's art gravitated towards considering the operation of the participant's body within larger social, architectural and environmental spaces.<sup>150</sup>

While Oiticica created his *Bólides*, Clark had already begun her *Bichos* (Beasts) series several years earlier in 1960. The *Bichos* consisted of hinged metal structures that could be opened and closed by viewers and manipulated into a number of different shapes (fig. 26). Like Oiticica's works, Clark's explore the unpredictable forms generated by viewers' gestures and actions. Drawing a parallel between both artists' endeavors to redefine both painting and geometric abstraction, Monica Amor writes:

In the opening of boundaries facilitated by the hinge, in the folding of arms and plaques prompted by the Beasts, in the disunifying compartments of the *Bolides*...Clark and Oiticica posited a dissolution of the enclosed, fictitious space of painting and an inquiry into the status of the subject and the object of representation.<sup>151</sup>

By deemphasizing visuality, both artists placed a greater importance on the body as a site for experience, knowledge and action.

As both artists moved into the next phase of their work, they sought a greater degree of spectator involvement through the use of their bodies. Beginning in 1964, Clark's

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<sup>149</sup> Oiticica and Clark worked together to create *Dialogue* in 1966. According to Clark, the work consisted of "our two right hands joined in opposite directions, each in one of the loops of a little Mobius cloth ribbon (elastic, there again), and by joining or releasing them, we experienced the resistance of matter." See Lygia Clark and Yve-Alain Bois, "Nostalgia of the Body," *October* 69 (Summer 1994): 86.

<sup>150</sup> Simone Osthoff, "Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica: A Legacy of Interactivity and Participation for a Telematic Future," *Leonardo* 30, no. 4 (1997): 283.

<sup>151</sup> Monica Amor, "From Work to Frame, In Between, and Beyond: Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica, 1959-1964," *Grey Room* 38 (Winter 2010): 31.

experimentation with wearable objects, such as masks, goggles and gloves in her *Nostalgia of the Body* series, sought an increased state of total body awareness for her participants by removing their reliance on sight.<sup>152</sup> In the same year, Oiticica turned towards the *parangolé* as a means to incorporate the participant and the work, and to present the body as what Small terms a “fundamentally plastic, transformable entity.”<sup>153</sup> For Oiticica, the *parangolé* was capable of creating both an internal, sensorial experience for the participant while also extending the body out into the surrounding environment as the dance performance unfolded (fig. 27). The dissolution of boundaries, especially between subjectivity and objectivity, and body and environment, becomes a central proposition of the *parangolé*.

Oiticica’s 1965 text “Notes on the Parangolé” expands on this concept of synthesis by considering the *parangolé* performance as a “total experience,” capable of transforming the spectator into a participant and pulling the outside world into the performance.<sup>154</sup> According to the artist, the act of being watched by someone becomes internalized by the wearer as he or she performs, which completes an active exchange of participation. Within the larger environment of the performance, those watching could also be watched by other unwitting “participants,” who enlarge the spatial reach of the performance and launch the potential for “creative perception” into the world.<sup>155</sup>

In his writings on the *parangolé*, Oiticica formulates a structural relationship between inside and outside forces that would be synthesized together and eventually dissolved throughout the performance. In his path towards developing the *parangolé*, Oiticica follows a similar

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<sup>152</sup> Osthoff, “Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica,” 282.

<sup>153</sup> Small, *Folding the Frame*, 183.

<sup>154</sup> Oiticica, “Notes on the Parangolé,” 93-94.

<sup>155</sup> Oiticica, “Notes on the Parangolé,” 96.

relationship defined by internal and external factors. Up until this point, this chapter has followed the artist's own internal trajectory in his pursuit of merging the formal aspects of geometric abstraction—especially color—with an increasing emphasis on viewer participation. The following section turns to the environmental factors that had a profound influence on the artist's development of the *parangolé*, particularly his growing interest in samba.

### **Sensorial Resistance: Samba, Tropicália and the *Parangolé***

Oiticica conceived of the first *parangolés* not only within the context of his increasingly participatory art, but also with his introduction to the Mangueira favela and its samba school. For Oiticica, samba and the *parangolé* were bound together in their exploration and expression of the body.<sup>156</sup> The forms complemented each other in their capacity to communicate gestures of the body while immersing it in the larger physical and social environment. In “Notes on the Parangolé,” Oiticica reiterated the connection between the *parangolé* and dance in the following way:

The spectator ‘wears’ the cape, which is made of layers of coloured cloth that appear to the extent that he moves, running or dancing. The work requires direct corporal participation; beyond covering the body, it requires that the body moves, that it dances, in the final analysis. The very ‘act of dressing’ oneself in the work already implies a corporal-expressive transmutation of oneself, which is the primordial characteristic of dance, its primary condition.<sup>157</sup>

Oiticica was introduced to the favela of Mangueira at the end of 1963 by his friend and fellow artist Jackson Ribeiro, who was then assisting the Mangueira samba school in creating

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<sup>156</sup> Oiticica, journal entry, dated June 14, 1966, in *Hélio Oiticica: Painting Beyond the Frame*, trans. Stephen Berg (Rio de Janeiro: Silvia Roesler Edições de Arte, 2008), 188.

<sup>157</sup> Oiticica, “Notes on the Parangolé,” 93.



decorations for the carnival parade the following year.<sup>158</sup> The transition to the city's north side, where Oiticica quickly embedded himself with the working class residents of the favela, was a welcome one. Seeking an escape from his own bourgeois environment and a place more compatible with his increasingly experimental tendencies, he was instantly attracted to Mangueira. In a November 1965 journal entry, Oiticica articulated the outsider identity he believed he shared with Mangueira's population, claiming that "marginalization, naturally an already present characteristic of the artist, has become fundamental for me."<sup>159</sup> This line from Oiticica's journal, and the larger entry from which it is excerpted, suggests a vision of the favela as a romanticized site of marginalization, fundamentally different from a life bounded by social regulations and elitist intellectualism. The potentially problematic issues surrounding such idealization of Mangueira residents are adequately summarized in Martino Stierli's characterization of the artist's "favelaization" of the urban poor. He writes:

It would do injustice to Oiticica to claim that his interest in the inhabitants and the social and material practices of the favela stood mainly in the service of his artistic programme, but a certain tendency of instrumentalizing the 'other' for the purposes of avant-garde experimentation cannot be denied.<sup>160</sup>

Stierli's position is countered by Monica Amor, who acknowledges the artist's romanticization of Mangueira residents, while also arguing that Oiticica "did reject a purely ocular and superficial relationship to them—specifically the practice then common among artists of venturing temporarily into these urban fringes to dress its dwellers for the carnival, creating

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<sup>158</sup> Amor, *Theories of the Nonobject*, 140.

<sup>159</sup> Hélio Oiticica, "Dance in My Experience," in *Participation*, ed. Claire Bishop (London: Whitechapel, 2006), 106. This text, titled "A Dança na Minha Experiência" originally appeared in Oiticica's diary entry dated to November 12, 1965. It was translated into English by Michael Asbury in 2006.

<sup>160</sup> Stierli, 73-74.

seasonal excitement around the favela, then withdrawing.”<sup>161</sup> By the mid-1960s, the favelas were visited by affluent and educated artists, anthropologists, and social figures who would either study or objectify the city’s lower-class communities, or briefly participate in carnival happenings. Although it was not uncommon for an upper-middle class, light-skinned Brazilian coming from the wealthier southern zone of Rio to travel to the favela, it was unusual for someone of that social position to seek sustained relationships with the poor, largely black residents of the northern favelas. Oiticica did, often visiting the favela every day for several months to integrate himself in the local music, dance and drug cultures.<sup>162</sup> Although Oiticica never lived in Mangueira, he developed significant relationships with its residents, many of whom would participate in his *parangolé* performances and be identified by name in performance photographs.<sup>163</sup>

In addition to the affinity Oiticica felt for the residents of Mangueira, he was also drawn to samba. Ribeiro, who had brought the artist to the favela, facilitated Oiticica’s introduction to the Mangueira samba school. After taking lessons there, Oiticica eventually became a *passista* (lead dancer) and participated in the 1965 carnival celebration.<sup>164</sup> Learning samba had a profound influence on Oiticica’s approach to experiencing art. Pedrosá would observe in 1966 that “it was during his initiation into samba that the artist parted from visual experience, in its purity, to an experience of touch, movement, of sensual fruition of materials where [the] body in its entirety, previously reduced to the visual, would become a source of total sensoriality.”<sup>165</sup> In

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<sup>161</sup> Amor, *Theories of the Nonobject*, 156.

<sup>162</sup> Amor, *Theories of the Nonobject*, 140-141.

<sup>163</sup> Lynn Zelevansky, “Hélio Oiticica’s Ethical Invention of Place,” in *Hélio Oiticica: To Organize Delirium*, 28.

<sup>164</sup> Amor, *Theories of the Nonobject*, 141.

<sup>165</sup> Pedrosa, 182.

his pursuit of total synthesis between body, object and environment, Oiticica sought out forms of cultural expression that offered a liberation of the body from the mind. For him, this was accomplished through samba.

Oiticica's interest in dance is well-established in his own writings. In a diary entry dated to November 12, 1965, three months to the day after his performance at *Opinião 65*, Oiticica wrote of a vital need for "de-intellectualization" in his own artistic practice, which could be countered through the "Dionysian" dimension of samba.<sup>166</sup> Oiticica viewed samba as a euphoric form of direct expression, unencumbered by traditional choreography and authorship, but rather "born out of the interior rhythm of the collective."<sup>167</sup> The body becomes completely incorporated into a larger ecstatic experience that seems both spiritual and sexual: "it as is if an immersion into rhythm takes place, a flux where the intellect remains obscured by an internal mythical force that operates at an individual and collective level."<sup>168</sup>

In his own involvement with samba, Oiticica viewed dance as an action capable of transcending social boundaries by synthesizing the individual body into a collective experience.

He continues:

The collapse of social preconceived ideas, of separations of groups, social classes, etc., would be inevitable and essential in the realization of this vital experience. I discovered here the connection between the collective and individual expression—the most important step towards this—which is the ability not to acknowledge abstract levels, such as social 'layers,' in order to establish a comprehension of a totality. The bourgeois conditioning which I had been submitted to since I was born undid itself as if by magic—I should mention, in fact, that the process was already under way even before I was aware of it.<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> Oiticica, "Dance in My Experience," 105.

<sup>167</sup> Oiticica, "Dance in My Experience," 105.

<sup>168</sup> Oiticica, "Dance in My Experience," 105.

<sup>169</sup> Oiticica, "Dance in My Experience," in *Participation*, 106.

Oiticica viewed his participation in samba not as an escape from one's social position, but as an act of complete social integration, "a total act of life."<sup>170</sup> Similar to the environment of the favela, in Oiticica's mind, samba became closely associated with opposition against elitist cultural expressions as well as bourgeois culture.

The idea of synthesis for Oiticica is central to his formulation of the "totality-work," a concept best represented by the *parangolés*' purported ability to unite different social classes and to "fus[e] together colour, structures, poetic sense, dance, words, [and] photography."<sup>171</sup> The synthesis of different creative practices Oiticica engages with mirrors the synthesis of sensory experiences in an artistic context, as described by Sylvia Casini. In her reframing of synesthesia in aesthetic terms, Casini expands synesthesia beyond its purely neurological definition, and instead characterizes it as "a mode to overcome the limitations of a specific artistic language and medium in order to absorb others, moving toward a total work of art capable of cross-stimulating our senses."<sup>172</sup> By integrating both samba and visual art in his performance, Oiticica absorbs the sensory properties of each, including the kinesthetic and aural qualities of dance and the optical and tactile qualities of visual art. The kinesthetic experience of the *parangolé* performances were particularly important to Oiticica, as the dancer's movements extended the body into space, activated the visual qualities of his work, and further affected the perceptual experience of the viewer.<sup>173</sup>

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<sup>170</sup> Oiticica, "Dance in My Experience," in *Participation*, 106.

<sup>171</sup> Oiticica, "Position and Program," in *Hélio Oiticica*, 103.

<sup>172</sup> Sylvia Casini, "Synesthesia, Transformation and Synthesis: Toward a Multi-Sensory Pedagogy of the Image," *Senses and Society* 12, no. 1 (March 2017): 5.

<sup>173</sup> Maxine Sheets-Johnstone offers an excellent study of kinesthesia, the proprioceptive sense of movement. She describes the tactile-kinesthetic body as "a body that is always in touch, always resounding with an intimate and immediate knowledge of the world about it." See Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, *The Roots of Thinking* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 16.

Oiticica clearly valued samba for its dynamic movements and its capacity to energize his wearable art forms. His writings also make evident a highly romanticized view of samba as a mythic, powerful life force capable of surpassing social boundaries in the pursuit of direct expression. Indeed, the artist's "synthesis" of this cultural form with his own artistic practice smooths over many of the historical and contemporary issues associated with the dance. In reality, samba occupied a complex position within the cultural environment of Brazil in the 1960s, as both a contested symbol of national unity and an art form increasingly commercialized in carnival celebrations. In order to understand its reception at the *Opinião 65* exhibition at the Museu de Arte Moderna in Rio, it is necessary to unpack the historical legacy of samba and its contemporary relationship to Brazilian culture.

While the precise history of samba remains uncertain, its roots may be traced to West Africa, the center of Brazil's slave population. The term samba is believed to have originated in Angola, where *semba* was used to refer to particular steps and movements seen in African dance.<sup>174</sup> The rhythmic drumbeat (*batuque*) of African religious ceremonies was adopted and continued in the secular music performed by slaves who worked Brazilian colonial plantations.<sup>175</sup> Eventually, samba's distinctive drumbeat was softened and accompanied with usually improvised lyrics, a practice which evolved into its current form.<sup>176</sup> Samba today is generally understood as its own genre of music, played with strings and percussion in syncopated

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<sup>174</sup> Lisa Shaw, *The Social History of the Brazilian Samba* (Brookfield, VT: Ashgate, 1999), 3.

<sup>175</sup> Robin E. Sheriff, "The Theft of Carnival: National Spectacle and Racial Politics in Rio de Janeiro," *Cultural Anthropology* 14, no. 1 (February 1999): 11.

<sup>176</sup> Alison Raphael, "From Popular Culture to Microenterprise: The History of Brazilian Samba Schools," *Latin American Music Review* 11, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 1990): 74.

2/4 time, and accompanied with lyrics and dancing.<sup>177</sup>

Before samba was “discovered” and put to use as a symbol of national identity in the 1920s, as the Brazilian anthropologist Hermano Vianna argues, its early history was marked by suppression. Following the end of slavery in 1888, *batuques* and *sambas*, along with other forms of cultural expression associated with former slaves, were forbidden. Such forms of state policing and social control were central to maintaining this group’s marginalization within the country, a process already established spatially through rapid urbanization that had pushed them to the northern zone of Rio, where shanty towns quickly developed.<sup>178</sup> These areas would quickly become the epicenter of samba practices. Unable to engage in dance in public, samba practitioners were forced to use private spaces, often their own homes, for performances.<sup>179</sup>

During the early twentieth century, samba acted as an identity marker for the poor, largely black community in Rio. However, beginning in the 1920s, samba rose rapidly to become a symbol of Brazilian cultural identity, as previous tactics of repression were largely replaced by tolerance and cooptation. During this time, samba became accepted by President Getúlio Vargas as a valued Brazilian art form, while Rio’s largely Afro-Brazilian carnival was brought under government sponsorship as a national festival.<sup>180</sup> As Lisa Shaw writes, “Samba and Afro-Brazilian cult practices were permitted, provided that their participants abided by certain rules

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<sup>177</sup> John Charles Chasteen, “The Prehistory of Samba: Carnival Dancing in Rio de Janeiro, 1840-1917,” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 28, no. 1 (February 1996): 30. According to Chasteen, most scholars date the musical origins of samba as a distinct genre to around 1916 or 1917, when the popular carnival song “Pelo telephone,” written by a young Afro-Brazilian musician named Donga, was composed and registered at the National Library in Rio de Janeiro. See also Mark A. Hertzman’s *Making Samba: A New History of Race and Music in Brazil* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 94-115.

<sup>178</sup> Shaw, 5.

<sup>179</sup> Riselia Duarte Bezerra, “Sambations: Samba and the Politics of Syncopation” (PhD diss., University of California, Riverside, 2000), 120.

<sup>180</sup> Shaw, 11.

laid down by the regime. Non-white institutions such as these were ‘Brazilianized,’ and their potential for subversion was defused.”<sup>181</sup>

Other ideological components were in play that corresponded with samba’s embrace in the 1920s and 1930s. The publication of *The Masters and the Slaves* in 1933 by the influential anthropologist Gilberto Freyre reconfigured samba as an ideal cultural expression of a unified Brazilian culture through its mixed-race (*mestiço*) origins. In his text, Freyre advanced the narrative that Brazil’s multi-racial population was a fundamental strength of the country, as it contributed to a unique national identity of racial and social egalitarianism. This narrative, of course, did not account for the fact that Afro-Brazilians primarily made up the poorest economic stratum of Brazilian society and that widespread racial prejudices towards darker-skinned populations were still pervasive.<sup>182</sup> However, for Freyre, embracing the racial hybridity of the country cultivated the appearance of a modernized, egalitarian nation, and samba—with its history of cross-cultural contact—became the perfect vehicle to promote a national image of racial harmony. A combination of intellectual writings, state promotion, and artistic contributions validated his views by the white elite.<sup>183</sup> Originally associated with black identity and colonialism, samba was transformed by those in power into a unifying symbol of the Brazilian nation as a whole.

As Vianna notes, samba’s history must reckon with this split narrative. On one hand, samba served as a form of repressed cultural expression for the city’s poorer social groups, who were its primary producers and consumers within the favelas. On the other hand, samba became

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<sup>181</sup> Shaw, 11.

<sup>182</sup> Peggy Lovell, “Development and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in Brazil, 1950-1991,” *Journal of Developing Areas* 33, no. 3 (Spring 1999): 396-400.

<sup>183</sup> Hermano Vianna, *The Mystery of Samba: Popular Music and National Identity in Brazil*, ed. and trans. John Charles Chasteen (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 2.

a co-opted product of a nationalized Brazil, converted by the elite classes into a symbol of *brasilidade*, or Brazilian identity, and rebranded for national and international consumption.<sup>184</sup>

The first narrative, which evoked the long legacy of colonialism, slavery, and rampant inequality between the country's dark-skinned Afro-Brazilian and light-skinned European population, was subsumed into a new narrative of racial and social harmony through samba's christening as a "nationalized" art form.

In her major study of the subject, anthropologist Barbara Browning discusses the limits of samba as an expression of racial democracy and national identity. She writes:

Those who would promote samba as a purely aesthetic form, the Brazilian national dance in its most harmless sense, are also those who have long promoted the fiction of a Brazilian racial democracy—a fiction which began to be inscribed with the destruction of the documents of slavery.<sup>185</sup>

As Browning argues, the national narrative that absorbed samba quickly obscured its substantial history of racial and social domination and subversion. Within the context of nationalist ideologies embracing racial and cultural mixing, other marginalized identities remained unacknowledged or neglected. This became especially apparent in the 1960s, when the military regime abruptly halted critical and public dialogue on race. Military leaders quickly denounced those who challenged the firmly entrenched narrative of Brazil's racial democracy. Those who spoke of the nation's social realities—poverty, violence and economic inequality—were seen as committing acts of subversion and brutally silenced through imprisonment and censorship.<sup>186</sup> Any discussion of race was seen as an incendiary act by leftists seeking to stir up social unrest.

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<sup>184</sup> Vianna, 10.

<sup>185</sup> Barbara Browning, *Samba: Resistance in Motion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 15.

<sup>186</sup> Lovell, 400.



The voice of leftist activists during this period must also be reckoned with, as they too sought to stake a claim in the nation's various forms of cultural and artistic production. In response to the country's power base of ultra-conservative nationalists, left-wing artists and youth activists emerged as an oppositional force during the 1960s. Developing from the Centros Popular de Cultura (CPC), this group of primarily middle-class students and intellectuals advocated for the raising of political consciousness through mass cultural and educational activities and for advancing revolutionary social transformation through an alliance of laborers, artists and writers.<sup>187</sup> The group's 1962 manifesto called on artists to create a "revolutionary popular art" that upheld political action and leftist ideology over aesthetic form, and valorized so-called "authentic" folk expressions of the Brazilian underclass as manifestations of premodern popular culture.<sup>188</sup>

Oiticica's art and political sensibilities developed alongside the CPC, due in large part to the influence of Ferreira Gullar, who served as director of the organization's chapter in Rio between 1962 and 1964.<sup>189</sup> By 1964, Oiticica had adopted some of the movement's populist tenets by incorporating social participation, vernacular materials and members of the favelas into his artistic practice. His political sympathies also remained with those combatting ultraconservative nationalism. However, Oiticica never fully embraced the artistic and political stances of the CPC, as formal experimentation and artistic subjectivity still remained central to his approach. Furthermore, Oiticica's wariness of ideological positions of any sort, especially those that valued art only for its political usefulness, or wielded it as a tool for creating yet

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<sup>187</sup> Christopher Dunn, *Brutality Garden: Tropicália and the Emergence of a Brazilian Counterculture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 40.

<sup>188</sup> Small, *Hélio Oiticica: Folding the Frame*, 203-204.

<sup>189</sup> Amor, *Theories of the Non-Object*, 141.

another totalizing narrative of national culture, steered him towards a different political affiliation.

Oiticica's political and artistic position most closely aligned with a countercultural group whose views coalesced into the Tropicalist movement of the late 1960s. The Tropicalist movement, or *tropicália*, originally emerged in the field of popular music, although it later encompassed theater, cinema, poetry, and the visual arts. The movement was loosely organized by Brazilian artists, musicians and activists at the end of the decade and offered a counter-position to both left-wing and right-wing attitudes towards art and national identity. In his 2001 study *Brutality Garden: Tropicália and the Emergence of a Brazilian Counterculture*, Christopher Dunn frames the movement in the following political context:

The tropicalist movement coalesced toward the end of a tumultuous decade marked by the intensification of left-wing activism and a reactionary military coup in 1964 aimed at preempting any movement for radical social transformation. Debates over the proper role of the artist in relation to progressive social and political movements oriented much of the cultural production during this period... With the advent of military rule, the state invested heavily in mass media technologies in an attempt to exert ideological influence throughout the national territory.<sup>190</sup>

The constellation of artists and musicians who formed the *Tropicália* group countered not only the conservative nationalism of the right, but also the leftist embrace of a new cultural nationalism, which advocated a return to a mythical, precolonial "authentic" Brazil and a rejection of foreign influence. Artists associated with the movement, including Oiticica at its outset, challenged both sides' ideological propositions regarding national identity by adopting an aesthetics of cultural mixing. Oiticica in particular was influenced by Oswald de Andrade's famous 1928 essay "Anthropophagic Manifesto" (*Manifesto antropófago*), in which the writer encouraged artists to consume and transform European influences as a way to move beyond

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<sup>190</sup> Dunn, *Brutality Garden*, 37.

them. Andrade's ideas provided a model of cultural production based on the metaphor of cannibalism, derived from indigenous peoples' devouring of Portuguese colonizers.<sup>191</sup> Andrade's proposal of cultural incorporation made no value distinction between national and foreign influences or high and low art forms, and thus provided a useful framework for artists who wished to consume global influences—including music, pop culture and art—and reinvent them as distinctly Brazilian forms.

In his own practice, Oiticica called for a “super anthropophagy” that absorbed not only the cultural colonialism of foreign models, but also cannibalized Brazil's own commercial nationalistic images.<sup>192</sup> Oiticica would describe the term in his 1967 essay “General Scheme of the New Objectivity,” stating:

Anthropophagy would be the defense that we have against foreign domination and the principal creative weapon, this constructivist will, which did not totally prevent a kind of cultural colonialism that today we want to objectively abolish, definitively absorbing it in a super-anthropophagy.<sup>193</sup>

The “super anthropophagy” advocated by Oiticica finds roots in his earlier vocabulary of “synthesis,” used to describe the integration of his visual *parangolés* with the kinesthetic movements of samba and the active exchange between the performer and viewer-participant. However, the conceptual position of Oiticica's super-anthropophagy seemingly differs from his earlier views. While his later writings encourage a post-modern appropriation of nationalistic cultural images and art forms, which would certainly include the commercialized spectacle of

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<sup>191</sup> Christopher Dunn, “Tropicália: Modernity, Allegory, and Counterculture,” in *Tropicália: A Revolution in Brazilian Culture, 1967-1972*, ed. Carlos Basualdo (São Paulo: Cosac Naify, 2005), 63.

<sup>192</sup> Cynthia Canejo, “The Resurgence of Anthropophagy: Tropicália, Tropicalismo and Hélio Oiticica,” *Third Text* 18, no. 1 (2004): 62.

<sup>193</sup> Oiticica's quote is translated in Carlos Basualdo's essay “Tropicália: Avant-Garde, Popular Culture, and the Culture Industry in Brazil (1967-1972),” in *Tropicália: A Revolution in Brazilian Culture*, 15. Originally published in “Esquema Geral da Nova Objetividade” in *Aspiro ao Grande Labirinto* (Rio de Janeiro: Rocco, 1986), 95.

carnival, his earlier ideas consider samba as a dehistoricized artistic—even religious—experience capable of transcending existing social systems. This apolitical view of samba eliminates potential conflict in its “synthesis” of Brazilian art forms, bodies and spaces, each of which were highly classed and racialized despite Oiticica’s idealistic framing. The artist’s differing positions of synthesis and super anthropophagy further demonstrate the ways samba could be assimilated to suit the narrative of the *parangolé* performance and other works.

Oiticica believed much of his art to be cannibalistic in nature, although one work in particular stood out to him as “the most anthropophagist work in Brazilian art”—the same work in fact, that would serve as the namesake for the entire movement.<sup>194</sup> The popular musician Caetano Veloso borrowed the title of *Tropicália* (1967), Oiticica’s first large-scale installation, for a song that would become an anthem against the military dictatorship. Oiticica’s work was presented publicly as part of the exhibition *Nova Objetividade Brasileira* (New Brazilian Objectivity) at the Museum of Modern Art in Rio in 1967, where his divisive *parangolé* performance had been suppressed two years earlier. This significant point will be returned to momentarily, as it sheds some light on the complexities and contradictions of Oiticica displaying his art in institutional spaces.

*Tropicália* consists of two wooden *Penetrables* arranged to form a maze that visitors could move through (fig. 28). These structures were surrounded by sand, potted plants, parrots and other clichés of a tropical paradise. Inside the *Penetrables*, visitors encountered makeshift interior settings with floral drapery and a television displaying stock Brazilian images.<sup>195</sup>

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<sup>194</sup> Oiticica, “Tropicália,” in *Hélio Oiticica*, 124.

<sup>195</sup> On the significance of the television set in *Tropicália*, Ivana Bentes has remarked, “The presence of the TV appliance-totem in Oiticica’s work points to the centrality of cultural discourses in post-1964 Brazil. Television, sanitized and censored, was the favored means of communication of the military regime. It was also the popular stage, the barometer of changes in behavior and consumption...It was present as an object of fascination in the lyrics

*Tropicália* presents an open-ended environment that consumes and transforms these exotic, artificial and highly commercial elements of modern-day Brazil. With his appropriation of such stereotypes of Brazilian culture, Oiticica critiques the idea of any authentic form of cultural nationalism. The words “A pureza é um mito” (purity is a myth), culled directly from Andrade’s “Anthropophagic Manifesto,” are written on a wall of one of the structures, underscoring the installation’s attempts to deconstruct the myth of both artistic and cultural purity.

Discussing the installation in 1968, Oiticica directly compares his earlier *parangolé* works to the collage of Brazilian images, cultural forms and national ideologies represented in *Tropicália*, writing:

*Tropicália* is the very first conscious, objective attempt to impose an obviously Brazilian image upon the current context of the avant-garde and national art manifestations in general. Everything began with the formulation of the *Parangolé* in 1964, with all my experience with the samba, with the discovery of the Morros, of the organic architecture of Rio’s favelas (and consequently of others, such as the palafitas [riverside shacks on stilts] of the state of Amazonas), and principally of the spontaneous, anonymous constructions in the great urban centres—the art of the streets, of unfinished things, of vacant lots, etc. *Parangolé* was the beginning, the seed, although still on a universalist plane of ideas (return to the myth, sensory incorporation, etc.), of the conceptions of ‘New Objectivity’ and *Tropicália*.<sup>196</sup>

For Oiticica, *Tropicália* catalyzed spectator participation and sensorial engagement in a similar fashion as the *parangolés*, while also announcing a new “Brazilian image” in contemporary art. What further unites both of these projects is the incorporation, and even appropriation, of Rio’s favelas in service of Oiticica’s artistic program. Previously represented in the *Opinão 65* performance of the *Parangolés* through the Mangueira dancers, *Tropicália* points to the material culture of the favela through the ephemeral *Penetrables* and cheap materials. Both projects rely

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of Tropicalist songs, and as a prop or point of reference in cinema.” See Ivana Bentes, “Multitropicalism, Cinematic-Sensation, and Theoretical Devices,” in *Tropicália: A Revolution in Brazilian Culture*, 99-100.

<sup>196</sup> Oiticica, “Tropicália,” in *Hélio Oiticica*, 125.

on the striking contrast between the modern, institutional space of the museum and the materials associated with the city's favela residents.

By bringing representations of the favela into the museum, *Tropicália* created an ambiguous political proposition. On one hand, the presentation of slum-like structures within the culturally elite space of the museum confronted viewers with the city's difficult social realities. Calling attention to the disenfranchisement and poverty experienced by those living there, the faux-favela environment of *Tropicália* countered the national ideology of racial democracy espoused by Brazil's authoritarian regime. At the same time, the installation's positioning in a museum created a safe environment for privileged viewers to experience an aestheticized approximation of Rio's urban spaces, without fear of encountering any of its actual problems. In contrast to the irruption of the city's urban poor in the *Opinão 65* performance, *Tropicália* removed both the urban bodies and the potential for empowered action in the space, thereby creating a more consumable experience for its audiences.

While Oiticica's installation, and the *tropicália* movement in general, synthesized the signs and systems of mass media, consumerism and national identity as a means of cultural critique, their very use of these elements produced conflicting meanings. As Flora Süssekind points out, "Tropicália related to a powerful consciousness of market forces, the entrenchment of the entertainment industry, and the star system to which artists connected to popular culture were subjected."<sup>197</sup> This form of engagement left the works of *tropicália* artists and musicians open to cooptation and indeed, within a few years of its formation in the late 1960s, the cultural messages of *tropicália* were quickly assimilated by the culture industry of Brazil, and its diluted form became commercialized and exported. Increasingly, *tropicália* artists and musicians also

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<sup>197</sup> Flora Süssekind, "Chorus, Contraries, Masses: The Tropicalist Experience and Brazil in the Late Sixties," in *Tropicália: A Revolution in Brazilian Culture*, 40.

had to comply with the conditions imposed by the military regime, or were relocated, sometimes forcibly, to other countries. Oiticica himself would move to London in 1969, then New York in 1970, where he continued to work until 1978.

Disillusioned by the assimilation of *tropicália* into dominant culture, Oiticica addressed his frustrations in the following terms:

And now, what do we see? Bourgeois, sub-intellectuals, cretins of every kind, preaching “Tropicalism”, *Tropicália* (it’s become fashionable!)—in short, transforming into an object of consumption which they cannot quite identify. It is completely clear! Those who made “stars and stripes” are now making their parrots, bananas, trees, etc., or are interested in slums, samba schools, outlaw anti-heroes (“Cara de Cavalo” has become à la mode), etc. Very well, but do not forget that there are elements here that this bourgeois voracity will never be able to consume: the direct life-experience (*vivência*) element, which goes beyond the problem of the image. Those who speak of “tropicalism” just pick up the image for consumption, ultra superficially, but the existential life-experience escapes them, because they do not have it. Their culture is still universalist, desperately in search of folklore, or, most of the time, not even that.<sup>198</sup>

Like the ambiguous positioning of *Tropicália*, the artist’s text can be read in several conflicting ways. Oiticica offers a strident critique of the culture industry, taking aim in particular at the bourgeois appropriation of marginalized forms of cultural expression. However, the artist’s characterization of “direct life-experience” is valorized as something inaccessible to the elite, a group that Oiticica takes pains to distance himself from, despite his educated, middle-class background. In the same text, it’s important to note that Oiticica frames his discussion within a racial framework. He writes:

In reality, with *Tropicália* I wanted to create the “myth” of miscegenation—we are Blacks, Indians, Whites, everything at the same time—our culture has nothing to do with the European, despite being, to this day, subjugated to it: only the Black and the Indian did not capitulate to it. Whoever is not aware of this can leave. For the creation of a true Brazilian culture, characteristic and strong, expressive at least, this accursed European and American influence will have to be absorbed, anthropophagically, by the Black and Indian of our land, who are, in reality, the only significant ones, since most products of

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<sup>198</sup> Oiticica, “*Tropicália*,” in *Hélio Oiticica*, 125.

Brazilian art are hybrids, intellectualized to the extreme, empty of any meaning of their own.<sup>199</sup>

Oiticica's valorization of Afro-Brazilian and indigenous populations rightly acknowledges their cultural contribution to Brazilian society, yet his views also strike an essentialist chord.

In light of this reaction, which was written one year after the installation of *Tropicália* at the Museum of Modern Art in 1967, we might return to Oiticica's consideration of samba as a similar form of cultural expression, venerable for its authentic connection to "direct life-experience" yet easily assimilated into his own artistic program. Consider the following quote as an example of Oiticica's "synthesis" of samba and the *parangolé*:

The *Parangolé*, for instance, when it demands participation through dance, is a mere adaptation of this structure and vice-versa with regard to this structure in dance—this is simply a transformation of this "total act of the self." The gesture, the rhythm, take on a new form which is determined by the demands of the *Parangolé's*, structure, being that pure dance is a trace of this structural participation—it is not a question of determining value levels in terms of one or another expression, since they are both (pure dance and dance in the *Parangolé*) total expressions.<sup>200</sup>

Oiticica's synthesis of samba as a coextensive expression of the *parangolé*, and vice versa, fails to recognize samba's importance as a singular, embattled form of cultural expression with its own history of transformation and assimilation. At the same time Brazil saw an enforced silence on issues of race and class, Rio's annual carnival festival rose to new heights of commercial success as an international tourist attraction. Oiticica's inclusion of samba dancers from Mangueira in the *Opinão 65* performance occurred concurrently with this confluence of contradictory social processes, yet his writings do not account for the changing position of samba and its position as a symbol of Brazilian identity in the national and international arena.

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<sup>199</sup> Oiticica, "Tropicália," in *Hélio Oiticica*, 125.

<sup>200</sup> Oiticica, "Dance in My Experience," in *Participation*, 106.



The failure to acknowledge the complex processes of integration and cooptation, domination and erasure, both in Brazilian culture between the advent of the military coup in 1964 to the assimilation of *tropicália* at the end of the decade, and in Oiticica's appropriation of favela culture, reveals the artist's own social and historical blind spots. Although Oiticica would famously claim that the world is the museum after performing at *Opinião 65*, his reliance on the museum in his *Tropicália* installation took a step back from the radical potential of the *parangolé* performance.<sup>201</sup> Furthermore, discussion of the original performance has elided the complex history of samba and its changing position within Brazilian society in the 1960s. By 1968, when Oiticica employed the *parangolé* in his performance for *Apocalipópotese* at the Atêrro do Flamengo park, he had already established himself as an important avant-garde artist, and his *parangolé* pieces, performed alongside other acclaimed artists, had become familiar, assimilated and, to quote Andrade's term, devoured by the public.

### **Recreating the Past: Experiencing the Parangolés**

The events that opened this chapter—Oiticica's 1965 performance at the Museum of Modern Art in Rio and his 1968 performance at Atêrro do Flamengo—were contingent not only on their physical activation, but also on the specific contexts in which the artist deployed them. These works relied on their immediate physical environment as well as their social, cultural, historical and political context to create meaning. Like all works of performance art, the *parangolés* are bounded by time and place, and must be understood as such. However, the continued presentation of the *parangolés* in museums today must also be folded into the ongoing evaluation of Oiticica's work, as their display often runs counter to their original function. The

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<sup>201</sup> Oiticica, "Position and Program," in *Hélio Oiticica*, 104.

following section will address the presentation of the *parangolés* after their initial performances—so far as writings, films, and other documentation allow us to imagine—in an attempt to better understand their sensory qualities. As Oiticica intended the *parangolé* to become a part of the body and move with it through dance, the experience of wearing the garment remains integral to its meaning. This section will also examine the effectiveness of their reproductions in museums in comparison to their original performance contexts. Such an analysis considers how Oiticica’s attitudes towards the *parangolés*’ integration with their social environment are translated to the institutional context of the museum.

In the extensive body of Oiticica literature, several writers have described their own experiences with wearing and viewing the *parangolés* in the present day. For art historian Anna Dezeuze, focusing on its experiential elements was motivated by the desire to “disentangle the *Parangolés* from the complex web that links the objects with Oiticica’s texts, their original context and reception, and the photographs that have been repeatedly exhibited and published.”<sup>202</sup> In order to accomplish this nearly impossible task of uncoupling the *parangolé* from previous visual and textual referents, Dezeuze tried on Oiticica’s *Parangole P11 Cape 7* (1966) and documented the occasion in two photography sessions—one in the studio and one outdoors. She describes the act of wearing the garment in the following terms:

Lifting the cape, turning my head, moving my body, I can relish the contrasting bright colors, touch the rough green fabric and the soft cotton cloth, and compare its two sides. I can pull out the long piece of gauze from a pocket in the cape and read the words on it, hold it up in front of my face like a semitransparent mask, or use it as a kind of shroud to cover parts of my body.<sup>203</sup>

Images from Dezeuze’s article show her demonstrating these various configurations,

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<sup>202</sup> Dezeuze, 60.

<sup>203</sup> Dezeuze, 60.

manipulating both the cloth and her body as she stands, jumps, and skips in each frame. Dezeuze's description of wearing an original *parangolé* is helpful in understanding its tactile surfaces and malleable form. However, as the photographs make clear, the *parangolés* are very much removed from their original context and worn in isolation, contrary to the artist's belief that they should be experienced relationally between multiple bodies and social situations. As a result, they appear more aestheticized than what might have emerged in their original performance.

Although no less aestheticized in a museum setting, a better sense of the *parangolé* might be understood by looking at them in this larger social framing, where they can be handled by viewers. This too, is not a perfect fit with the artist's views. Oiticica originally proposed the *parangolé* as a form intended for public use in the streets of Rio, where participants could freely touch and enjoy them. Museums have made attempts to accommodate both Oiticica's vision and viewers' desire to touch the art by displaying reproductions alongside original works. While the originals are exhibited behind glass, the copies may be touched and, in some cases, worn.

Reproductions of Oiticica's *parangolés* were available for American audiences in the 2006 showing of *Hélio Oiticica: The Body of Color*, organized by the Museum of Fine Arts Houston and Tate Museum.<sup>204</sup> In his discussion of the Museum of Fine Arts Houston's exhibition, Johannes Birringer describes his own encounter with the *parangolés* as follows:

I want to pay close attention to the exhibition's placement of the *Parangolés* at one end of its installation, where they hang on the wall (the originals) or are draped over dress-hangers (copies) ready to be used by the public on an open dance floor that stretches out in front of three large film screens. On the screens, a short, looped film is projected (as a triptych, played out of sync) showing Oiticica moving up Mangueira Hill with the fabric

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<sup>204</sup> According to Guy Brett, these reproductions were commissioned by close friends and family of the artist. Luciano Figueiredo, an artist and director of the Centro Cultural Hélio Oiticica and his sister Ariane, who assists with the archive of the Projeto Hélio Oiticica in Rio de Janeiro, oversaw the creation of the *parangolés* for this show after extensively researching the artist's materials and process. See Guy Brett, "Hélio Oiticica," *Tate Papers* 8 (Autumn 2007): 1-4.

materials. Then a woman with *Parangolés* is seen dancing on the street, seemingly entranced and exhilarated by the experience (perhaps during the Carnival). Next, an Afro-Brasilian [sic] samba dancer moves eloquently in the colorful capes, seen outdoors among a tropical environment of trees and plants. Finally: a blurred close up of a yellow *Parangolé* folding and turning. The out of phase parallel image-movements create a strange sensation of vertigo, underscored by polyrhythmic percussion music.<sup>205</sup>

The pairing of the unnamed film, perhaps Amado's *Apocalipópotese*, next to the garments offered viewers the chance to see what they looked like in action, while at the same time it provided a visual tutorial of how one might interact with them. The dance floor created an open proposition for viewers to engage in movement themselves. Continuing to discuss the potential for participation, Birringer notes that "On certain days of the week, young local dancers wear the capes and perform to the samba rhythms, then solicit museum visitors to try on the *Parangolés*. Disappointingly, no one in fact dared to do so on those occasions I was there."<sup>206</sup> This reluctance to interact is not totally surprising considering museums' deeply engrained no-touch policies, as well as a general self-consciousness on the part of viewers to not single themselves out for attention in such spaces. For Birringer, the presentation and interaction with the garments turned out to be in anemic contrast to the volatile, anarchic performances that characterized the garments' early appearances.

The participatory qualities of the *parangolés* continued to be explored in the most recent survey of the artist's career, *Hélio Oiticica: To Organize Delirium* in 2016. The exhibition opened at the Carnegie Museum of Art in September 2016 and traveled to the Art Institute of Chicago and the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. This particular show marked the first retrospective of the artist's work in the United States in more than twenty years. I was able to visit this exhibition at two of its venues—the Carnegie and Whitney—and experience the

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<sup>205</sup> Johannes H. Birringer, "Bodies of Color," *PAJ: Journal of Performance and Art* 29, no. 3 (September 2007): 38.

<sup>206</sup> Birringer, 38.

*parangolés* myself, which enabled a better understanding of their physical makeup and contemporary presentation.

My first interaction with a *parangolé* occurred at the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh. The *parangolés* bookended the Carnegie's enormous retrospective, which occupied two floors of the museum. Before entering the main gallery space, archival film footage from Amado's *Apocalipópotese* (1968) played on a giant screen. The lively music and visuals set the stage for the explosion of color displayed in the first gallery, which featured earlier works from the artist's *Metaesquemias*, *Penetrables*, and *Bólides* series. Several original *parangolés* were included in the same gallery in the form of capes, banners, and tents, although they could not be touched due to their fragile condition (figs. 29-30). Interactive pieces were sprinkled throughout the show, and sensory encounters lingered long after exiting the space. Throughout the entire exhibition, the diverse sensory experiences emphasized in Oiticica's body of work were on display and accessible to visitors, who, for the most part, were excited to participate.

The interactive *parangolé* reproductions were included at the end of the exhibition, after moving to the museum's lower gallery spaces. Although physically separate from the originals, their placement next to Oiticica's sprawling, sand-filled installation *Eden* (1969), which occupied the entire floor of the Museum's Hall of Sculpture, and the red-walled mini gallery with a billiard table modeled after Vincent van Gogh's *Night Café* (1888), cleverly gathered the most interactive works in the same space. The *parangolés'* placement next to two popular installations created an environment where visitors were more likely to participate. Unlike Birringer's experience, I wasn't the only person trying on the garments, and I struck up a conversation with several people as we tried on different *parangolés*, modelling them and noting their surprising weight and awkwardness as we attempted to move.

In contrast to the Carnegie's integration of the *parangolé* reproductions with other interactive installations, at the Whitney, the *parangolés* were almost completely siloed in a small, dark room separate from the more airy, open galleries that featured the artist's earlier two-dimensional works. The garments hung on a coat rack on one side of the small room while a digital slideshow projected on the wall various black-and-white and color images from early performances (fig. 31). Although samba rhythms were piped in, the overall environment of the space was gloomy, isolated and not conducive to creating the kind of ecstatic energy Oiticica envisioned in their original context. The emphasis on viewer participation as a key element of Oiticica's practice seemed less considered by curators Donna De Salvo and Elisabeth Sussman across the entire exhibition, as they also excluded notable interactive works, including his *Filter Project: For Vergara* (1973), a large-scale, multi-sensory installation reminiscent of favela architecture.<sup>207</sup>

Considering the artist's criticisms towards artistic and cultural commercialism, works capitalizing on Oiticica's aesthetic in the Whitney's gift shop felt distinctly out of step with the larger goals of the exhibition. *Parangolé*-inspired items for sale included hammocks, urban utility bags and, perhaps most jarringly, reproductions of Oiticica's *Seja marginal seja herói* (Be an Outlaw, Be a Hero), based on a flag featuring the dead body of Cara de Cavalo, a friend of the artist who was killed by a government paramilitary group in 1968. The display of garments next to these items also bore a striking resemblance to the *parangolés* on display within the exhibition, albeit with a price tag (fig. 32). In *Unmarked*, Phelan writes, "As those artists who have dedicated themselves to performance continually disappear and leave 'not a rack behind' it

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<sup>207</sup> Holland Cotter, "Cool Heat: An Outlaw who Still Simmers," *New York Times*, July 13, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/13/arts/design/cool-heat-an-art-outlaw-who-still-simmers.html>. As Cotter notes, the Whitney curators placed a greater emphasis on works Oiticica created while in New York, to the exclusion of other works made by the artist in Rio and London.

becomes increasingly imperative to find a way to remember the undocumentable, unreproducible art they made.”<sup>208</sup> In the case of the saleable *parangolés* at the Whitney, audience participation occurs largely through the rote actions of capitalism.

Although both venues faced the same curatorial challenges of presenting participatory artworks to an audience far removed from the time and place of their creation, the different reactions of visitors reveal that not all institutional settings are experienced in the same way. Museums, like public spaces, can be altered to create different social experiences. Yet these works remain distanced from their original context, and within a gallery environment, the *parangolés* initiate a new proposition. As Irene Small writes, “These posthumous replicas now preserve the material memory of their lost originals. Having acquired a new degree of authenticity, they will be replicated in turn, initiating a chain of copies that point back to an absent source.”<sup>209</sup> Oiticica’s kinetic garments are no longer fully activated in a social or political sense by those who wear them, nor are they framed by the volatile, contradictory, and messy environment of their origins. The *parangolés* have now become contingent objects, suspended between a past that becomes more tempting to mythologize as we reckon with their present—hanging on white walls or as copies on hangers. Yet we must also acknowledge the *parangolés* history of assimilation, not as a recent process initiated by its placement in contemporary museum exhibitions, but as a part of their very creation, culture and history.

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<sup>208</sup> Phelan, 31.

<sup>209</sup> Small, *Hélio Oiticica: Folding the Frame*, 230.

### Ch. 3: Radical Edibles: Food, Fashion and Taste in *Robert Kushner and Friends Eat Their Clothes*

*When 'taste' is disparaged in intellectual debate, you know that someone has decided, on your behalf, what is good and bad for you: shut up and eat your spinach. 'Taste' expresses a permanent crisis in civilization.*

– Peter Schjeldahl, “Notes on Taste”

*'Velveeta Epauettes' was one of my most successful costumes. Simply picturing the words 'Velveeta' and 'epauettes' is enough to conjure the essence of the ensemble.*

– Robert Kushner, “Food + Clothing =”

#### Introduction

On December 10<sup>th</sup>, 1972, Robert Kushner entered Robert Stearns' loft at 28 Greene Street, an affiliate of The Kitchen and one of the more radical spaces for performance practices in New York at that time, to stage *Robert Kushner and Friends Eat Their Clothes*.<sup>210</sup> More than two hundred audience members were present for this curious performance, an overflow crowd likely drawn in by the enticing advertisement run in *The Village Voice* the week before. The ad promised an interactive, food-based fashion show that would be “all in good taste, of course.”<sup>211</sup> After contributing their \$1.00, audience members took a seat on the floor, and waited. Robert Kushner emerged wearing one of his own creations. Setting the tone for the unconventional and often gender-bending clothing that would soon unfold over the course of the performance, the artist posed on a small runway in the middle of the room, described his outfit—a scallion mini-skirt and graduated mushroom necklace—then assumed the position of emcee (fig. 33).<sup>212</sup>

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<sup>210</sup> The Kitchen, originally located in the Mercer Arts Center in Greenwich Village, was founded by artists Steina and Woody Vasulka in April 1971 as a site for experimental video and performance works. See Marvin J. Taylor, ed. *The Downtown Book: The New York Art Scene, 1974-1984* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Architectural Press, 2006) and Julie Ault, ed. *Alternative Art, New York, 1965-1985* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

<sup>211</sup> “Scenes,” *Village Voice*, December 7, 1972.

<sup>212</sup> Kushner, “Food + Clothing =,” 82.



Fifteen elaborate and edible garments worn by non-professional models, many of them friends of the artist, took center stage. Such memorable apparel and accessories as pita chaps, apricot leather vests and escarole wigs made their way down the runway, each carefully narrated by Kushner. Entire outfits were made to celebrate the artistic possibilities of food while playfully addressing kitschy inspirations. A woman named Deborah modeled a Carmen Miranda-styled number of “pineapples with a lady-apple-off-the-shoulder halter, a chestnut and cranberry tiara, and a skirt of apple and pink grapefruit slices”<sup>213</sup> (fig. 34). Another model, a man with dark curly hair, wore a calves’ tongue necklace, Jewish rye bread mini-vest, and pita Nehru cap (fig. 35). Commenting on the outfit and the model’s oil-stained chest, the artist would later write that such a mix provided “a racy mixed metaphor of hedonism and Salvation Army.”<sup>214</sup> One can only imagine the aroma of such a creation and, shortly after, the taste. As ephemeral as their source material, these edible garments quickly dematerialized as models and audience members ate the ensembles in the show’s denouement (fig. 36).

Ripe with aspects of consumption, collectivity and eroticism, *Robert Kushner and Friends Eat their Clothes* marks an unusual moment in New York’s contemporary art scene. Not only did the performance present an artistic happening in the familiar commercial format of the fashion show—a laying bare of art and capitalism—but it also radically expanded the traditional means by which one experiences art, clothing, and the everyday act of eating. Occurring at the end of America’s countercultural era, Kushner’s performance also reveals a close alignment with many of the oppositional tendencies that movement advocated—nudity, collaboration, environmentalism, feminism and the consciousness-raising possibilities of the senses. The

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<sup>213</sup> Kushner, “Food + Clothing=,” 80.

<sup>214</sup> Kushner, “Food + Clothing=,” 80.

following chapter will take up the significance of these topics in Kushner's performances and in relation to the broader cultural moment of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Just as Kushner's performances confronted many of the social norms of mainstream society, they too challenged the dominant experience of art in the postwar period. Placed within an artistic context, Kushner's performances reject the Greenbergian modernist narrative that sought what art historian Caroline A. Jones calls "a bureaucratization of the senses, ordained and secured by the ocular."<sup>215</sup> By using food and clothing as primary vehicles for sensory experience and participation, Kushner's works offer an alternative model for audience interaction through the senses, particularly through taste.

Kushner's projects, specifically *Robert Kushner and Friends Eat Their Clothes*, advance an interactive experience and conceptual focus rarely seen in performance art at that time—one concentrated on the sensory and social dimensions of taste. The dual meaning of taste, as both the primary sense associated with discerning different flavors through the act of eating, as well as the subjective experience of determining value in a work of art, will be explored throughout the chapter in relation to Kushner's performances, wherein taste becomes the primary vehicle for audience members to participate and pass aesthetic judgment.

In addition to framing Kushner's projects within aesthetic, anthropological, sociological and philosophical studies of taste, this chapter will further contextualize Kushner's performances within food-based practices of the late 1960s and early 1970s. The elements of taste and participation in Kushner's performances, I contend, were significantly shaped not only by the artistic atmosphere of New York's SoHo neighborhood, but also its social environment.

Significantly, Kushner's performance was created shortly after his move from California to New

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<sup>215</sup> Caroline A. Jones, "Our 'Modernist Sensibility'" in *Action/Abstraction: Pollock, de Kooning and American Art, 1940-1976*, ed. Norman L. Kleeblatt (New York: Jewish Museum, 2008), 194.

York in 1972, and coincided with his subsequent employment with FOOD, an artist-run site for cooking and collaborative exchange. This chapter will explore, in part, the influence of FOOD's meal-based experimentation and sense of social community with Kushner's shift to edible food performances. Kushner's performance wove together a remarkable number of people and resources, from the viewer-participants in the audience to the commune-sourced edible materials Kushner would become connected with in the alternative spaces of New York's SoHo district. The influence of collaborative, food-based projects—and the cultural environment that fostered them—on Kushner's art, cannot be overstated, and proves a fruitful avenue of inquiry for understanding how such projects were produced and subsequently received by audiences during the early 1970s.

Despite the performance's inventiveness and popularity, *Robert Kushner and Friends Eat Their Clothes* and related food performances remain understudied in the history of American performance art. In this chapter, I hope to redress the performance's notable absence from the art historical record and explore how Kushner's projects creatively engage with the collectively minded possibilities of food, clothing and the senses in art.

### **Review of Literature and Critical Interpretations of Kushner's Early Performances**

Performances like *Robert Kushner and Friends Eat Their Clothes* offer creativity and subversive humor in abundance. Nonetheless, scholars have only recently begun to understand the artist's contributions to the field of performance art in the 1970s. The majority of Kushner scholarship is dedicated to the artist's cofounding of Pattern and Decoration, an American art movement that emerged in the mid-1970s in response to minimalism and conceptual art.<sup>216</sup> This

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<sup>216</sup> See in particular Anne Swartz's exhibition catalogue *Pattern and Decoration: An Ideal Vision in American Art, 1975-1985* (Yonkers, NY: Hudson River Museum, 2007).

academic focus matches the trajectory of Kushner's career, as the majority of his output has been paintings, with infrequent performances since the 1970s.

Alexandra Anderson-Spivy's monograph *Robert Kushner: Gardens of Earthly Delight* (1997) offers the most complete discussion of the artist's career through the mid-1990s. While Anderson-Spivy's book offers insightful commentary on Kushner's performances, and will be referenced throughout this chapter, her text concentrates on the scope of Kushner's career and highlights mostly two-dimensional works.<sup>217</sup> For his contribution to clothing and fashion studies, the artist appears in several articles and exhibition catalogues, including curator Melissa Leventon's exhibition catalogue *Artwear: Fashion and Anti-Fashion* (2005) for the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, alongside the American performance artist Pat Oleszko.<sup>218</sup> The most thorough discussion of Kushner's clothing performances to date is featured in Dara Meyers-Kingsley's and Catherine Morris's "Off the Wall: The Development of Robert Kushner's Fashion and Performance Art, 1970-1976," published in *Fashion Theory* in 2001. The authors of this article convincingly argue that "the artist's exuberant painting style can be traced to his earlier body of work devoted to fashion and performance," without much discussion of the artist's sensorial activation or participatory strategies.<sup>219</sup> Furthermore, these authors neglect the importance of considering food and the experience of eating as a key entry point for understanding Kushner's art.

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<sup>217</sup> Alexandra Anderson-Spivy, *Robert Kushner: Gardens of Earthly Delight* (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1997), 19-24. In particular, chapter 3 of Anderson-Spivy's text, entitled "The Eternal Exhibitionist: Performance and Costume," highlights Kushner's performance pieces.

<sup>218</sup> Melissa Leventon, *Artwear: Fashion and Anti-Fashion* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2005), 135. Kushner is included in Ch. 5, "Stretching the Boundaries: Conceptual and Performance Pieces."

<sup>219</sup> Dara Meyers-Kingsley and Catherine Morris, "Off the Wall: The Development of Robert Kushner's Fashion and Performance Art, 1970-1976," *Fashion Theory* 5, no. 3 (Sept. 2001): 311. "Off the Wall" tantalizingly offered a co-curated exhibition by the article's authors, entitled *Pret-a-Porter: Robert Kushner, Performance and Fashion, 1970-80*. According to Kushner in an interview with the author on April 29, 2016, this exhibition never came to pass.

Significantly, a discussion of Kushner's performance art and his critical position within food practices of the late-1960s and 1970s is also lacking. This omission is not completely surprising, considering that the creative use of food in contemporary art has only recently begun to receive sustained scholarly attention from art historians. Surveys from the early 1990s, such as Linda Weintraub's exhibition catalogue *Art What Thou Eat: Images of Food in American Art* (1991), are reflective of conservative curatorial tendencies that focus on representations of food in painting and two-dimensional arts, rather than their material use.<sup>220</sup> Such curatorial decisions avoid a consideration of how performance-based practices use food in meaningful ways.

However, a growing number of exhibition catalogues, monographs, articles and dissertations on the subject have been published within just the past five years that explore food in art as more than mere image. The most recent exhibitions to survey international food-based practices in contemporary art include the Smart Museum's exhibition *Feast: Radical Hospitality in Contemporary Art* (2013), which chronicles the artist-centered meal from the early twentieth century to the present.<sup>221</sup> Kushner's absence is conspicuously felt in the chapter entitled "Conceptual and Performative Feasts: 1960s and 1970s," which explores various models of performance and food experimentation in the works of Alison Knowles, Gordon Matta-Clark, Bonnie Ora Sherk, Daniel Spoerri and others.

Several recent edited volumes, monographs and dissertations have also proposed food as an important artistic and social medium. Thomas Howells and Leanna Hayman's *Experimental Eating* (2014) and Barbara Fischer's *Foodculture: Tasting Identities and Geographies in Art*

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<sup>220</sup> Linda Weintraub, ed. *Art What Thou Eat: Images of Food in American Art* (Mount Kisco, NY: Moyer Bell Limited, 1991).

<sup>221</sup> Stephanie Smith, ed. *Feast: Radical Hospitality in Contemporary Art* (Chicago: Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago, 2013).

(1999) have explored food in contemporary art at the intersection of science and identity, respectively.<sup>222</sup> Cecilia Novero's *Antidiets of the Avant-Garde: From Futurist Cooking to Eat Art* (2010) has sought a more historical understanding of food and everyday life through the activities of twentieth-century European artists.<sup>223</sup> Most recently, Mark Clintberg has researched modern and contemporary artworks that take the form of food service sites in his dissertation "The Artist's Restaurant: Taste and the Performative Still Life."<sup>224</sup> His case studies include works by artists and chefs including Daniel Spoerri, Dean Baldwin, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Ferran Adrià at elBulli and others. Clintberg ambitiously attempts to create a chronology of art historical representations of food by connecting seventeenth-century still life paintings to contemporary, performance-based art practices.<sup>225</sup> However, for the purposes of this study, his framing of food is far too limited to conventional restaurant-like settings, and does not allow for alternative environments where food may be experienced differently between the artist, performers, and viewer-participants.

Though previous accounts of Kushner's art and key sources on the history of performance-based food practices will inform my discussion of his projects, they ultimately provide incomplete accounts of how to address the artist's merging of food, clothing and participation in a broader cultural context. None have elaborated on the projects' relationship with food and the senses, or how the countercultural ethos of the era played an integral role in

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<sup>222</sup> Thomas Howells and Leanna Hayman, eds. *Experimental Eating* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2014) and Barbara Fischer, ed. *Foodculture: Tasting Identities and Geographies in Art* (Toronto: XXY Books, 1999).

<sup>223</sup> Cecilia Novero, *Antidiets of the Avant-Garde: From Futurist Cooking to Eat Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

<sup>224</sup> Mark Clintberg, "The Artist's Restaurant: Taste and the Performative Still Life" (PhD diss., Concordia University, 2013).

<sup>225</sup> Clintberg, "The Artist's Restaurant," 1.

shaping Kushner's approach to his edible performances. My goal is to examine Kushner's performance in light of the social, political and philosophical objectives of the counterculture that were expressed within it, and how the oppositional aesthetic tendencies in the post-war period—namely collaborative and multi-sensory performance practices—are intertwined with such cultural movements. Before delving into this discussion, the following section will explore how Kushner arrived at food and clothing as artistic materials from an early age, and the impact of Southern California's cultural and political environment in the 1960s on the artist's formative years.

### **Kushner's Artistic Influences and Early Performances**

Robert Kushner was born in 1949 in Pasadena, California and grew up in the nearby suburb of Arcadia. When recalling his early influences, Kushner is quick to cite childhood experiences as a primary source of his artistic development, particularly his home life and the professions of his parents. Kushner's mother, Dorothy Browder Kushner, was an abstract painter and art teacher who studied under Thomas Hart Benton at the Kansas City Art Institute before receiving her master's degree from Columbia University Teachers' College.<sup>226</sup> His father, Joseph Kushner, was a real estate broker and furrier.<sup>227</sup> Both of his parents worked with the kind of decorative materials and iconography Kushner would later reference in his own projects. Growing up, Kushner was drawn to certain techniques he learned from both parents involving such diverse materials as fur, fabrics and painting, and was encouraged in particular by his mother to pursue a creative practice.

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<sup>226</sup> Anderson-Spivy, 16.

<sup>227</sup> Linda Montano, *Performance Artists: Talking in the Eighties* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 85.

Further artistic skills were developed with guidance from family members and others in the young artist's orbit, including the ability to weave from a family housekeeper and crocheting from his grandmother.<sup>228</sup> Recalling his grandmother's creativity, Kushner observes:

My grandmother lived near us, and she would make her own hats to wear to service every Saturday morning, so she had boxes of feathers, silk flowers, and rhinestone buttons. All of those things were sources of intense fascination and real pleasure.<sup>229</sup>

Indeed, needlework and craft practices used to create bright, colorful patterns—the opposite of what Kushner describes as “macho art materials that you were expected to use”—would become the signature techniques of the artist's early decorative aesthetic.<sup>230</sup> It would also set the tone for the artist's challenge to the hierarchy of Western art practices in terms of materials and subject matter.

In *Robert Kushner: Gardens of Earthly Delight*, Anderson-Spivy points out that most of the materials and skills the artist would incorporate into his own artistic vocabulary were acquired from the women in Kushner's life.<sup>231</sup> While the female family members played a more active role in mentoring, the male figures in the young artist's life were also well-versed in practices traditionally associated with women's labor. According to Kushner, “My family constellation, it was always blurred. . . . The men knew how to sew and cook. The women, at least my mother and her associates, were in the studio painting. So it was all a little bit mixed up.”<sup>232</sup> This unconventional domestic space allowed Kushner to more freely explore the

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<sup>228</sup> Meyers-Kingsley and Morris, 315.

<sup>229</sup> Montano, 85.

<sup>230</sup> Montano, 85.

<sup>231</sup> Anderson-Spivy, 16.

<sup>232</sup> Kushner, in interview with the author, April 29, 2016.



activities of childhood fascination once he began his formal art training at the University of California San Diego (UCSD).

Kushner continued to explore the techniques and materials traditionally associated with women's work and the anonymous craft practices of artisans during his undergraduate years at UCSD. Claiming one of the more experimental programs at the time, the university's art department quickly became a renowned center for conceptual art.<sup>233</sup> The radical arts curricula and intellectually minded professors undoubtedly created an environment that fostered Kushner's exploration of unconventional interests. Among the many influential artists, musicians and theorists Kushner came into contact with were Miriam Schapiro, John Baldessari, David Antin, Pauline Oliveros and Paul Brach.<sup>234</sup> None were as important to Kushner's developing ideas of art, however, as Amy Goldin (1926-1978), an influential art historian, critic and champion of the decorative arts. Kushner's relationship with Goldin would have a significant impact on his career, as her writing helped shape the main principles of Pattern and Decoration, a movement that embraced maximalist excess and non-Western influences in its challenge to minimalist austerity.<sup>235</sup> Goldin and her followers rejected the constraints of minimalism and conceptualism by proposing "decoration, pattern, beauty and visual pleasure" as their main artistic criteria.<sup>236</sup> Kushner and his friend and UCSD colleague Kim MacConnel would become future members of this group.<sup>237</sup>

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<sup>233</sup> Anderson-Spivy, 16.

<sup>234</sup> Anderson-Spivy, 16.

<sup>235</sup> Holland Cotter, "Robert Kushner," in *Robert Kushner: Gardens of Earthly Delight*, 8.

<sup>236</sup> Swartz, 12.

<sup>237</sup> Janet Kardon, "Opulent Subversions," in *Robert Kushner*, ed. Janet Kardon (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 1987), 11.

In addition to his colleagues at UCSD, the cultural environment of Southern California also had a significant impact on the artist. An increasingly open-minded culture was reflected in a “new, synthetic visual vocabulary” of multicultural influences, where “kente cloth, Indian madras, and San Francisco tie-dye walked the streets,” according to Holland Cotter.<sup>238</sup> He continues, “Mandalas and macramé, flowers and raised fists became generational emblems. Visually, distinctions between the sexes blurred.”<sup>239</sup> Just as importantly, California offered an environment of nature and artifice, both fertile areas of influence for the artist.<sup>240</sup>

The changing appearance of California fashion became one of many signs indicating that a larger cultural transformation was taking place on the West Coast during the late 1960s. Young people adopted looser clothing as well as looser attitudes towards sex, drugs and authority. Home to the “Summer of Love” in 1967, Human “Be-Ins,” and a prolific number of commune outposts, California would become a major site of the growing counterculture. Defined loosely as a romantic social movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s, the counterculture consisted primarily of young people who sought an alternative to the repressive conditions of mainstream American society through self-empowerment and social harmony.<sup>241</sup> Following Timothy Leary’s famous mantra “Turn on, tune in, drop out,” spoken at the 1967 Be-In at San Francisco’s Golden Gate Park, the counterculture’s hippie population embraced a more utopian vision of an independent, egalitarian way of life.

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<sup>238</sup> Cotter, 8.

<sup>239</sup> Cotter, 8.

<sup>240</sup> Melinda Wortz makes this excellent point in her catalogue essay for *Shift NY/LA*. She writes, “For Robert Kushner...art and life cannot be separated. Similarly, in Southern California where he grew up, nature and artifice are in such close competition that they are often indistinguishable, thanks to the film industry and Disneyland. Kushner incorporates his own body and the most basic activities necessary to its survival in his art.” See *Shift: LA/NY*, ed. Paul Schimmel (Newport Beach, CA: Newport Harbor Art Museum, 1982), 12.

<sup>241</sup> Timothy Miller, *The Hippie and American Values*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2011), xvi.

The ethics of the counterculture in California dovetailed with several key political and social rights issues of the time. Young students in the state's university system, in particular, benefited from the presence of radical political thinkers who contributed to countercultural ideas. In Kushner's milieu, the German-American philosopher and social theorist Herbert Marcuse (1898-1979), who arrived at UCSD in the mid-1960s, had a tremendous impact on the college's student population—most famously, perhaps, in his advising of political activist Angela Davis. Marcuse is well known for his role in the New Left political movement, which gained popularity in the United States primarily on college campuses in the 1960s. Students involved in the New Left group advocated for broad reforms, promoting direct democracy, and countering corruption and systemic social injustices.<sup>242</sup> Although the New Left and the counterculture were two separate movements, with the former typically more overtly political, the groups shared similar goals.

Marcuse's ideas provide a crucial link between the two movements. Writings such as *Eros and Civilization* (1955) and *One-Dimensional Man* (1964) critiqued the repressive and alienating conditions of mainstream society and sought a transformed culture compatible with such countercultural sensibilities as freedom, self-expression and harmony. Marcuse's belief in a revolutionary subjectivity that would struggle against a repressive, hegemonic consumer culture, supported in his case by Marxist beliefs, anticipated the spirit of opposition in the 1960s counterculture.<sup>243</sup> The ideas in Marcuse's texts were likely known to Kushner, who was attuned

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<sup>242</sup> Doug Rossinow, "'The Revolution is About Our Lives': The New Left's Counterculture," in *Imagine Nation: The American Counterculture of the 1960s and '70s*, ed. Peter Braunstein and Michael William Doyle (New York: Routledge, 2002), 99.

<sup>243</sup> See Douglas Kellner, "Marcuse and the Quest for Radical Subjectivity," *Social Thought and Research* 22, nos. 1/2 (1999): 1-24.

to political events on campus, specifically those related to civil rights and feminist issues.<sup>244</sup>

Despite the liberal program of both the UCSD arts department, which served as a relatively safe space for artistic experimentation in the late 1960s, the close-knit community of mentors and colleagues that supported his exploration of “feminine” materials, and the rhetoric of liberation espoused by young radicals, Kushner became aware of the Southern Californian counterculture’s limits as soon as he took his sewing outside of the classroom. Kushner often crocheted garments at social gatherings, which tended to make people react negatively. At one point, he was asked not to partake in such an activity at a series of political meetings he attended.<sup>245</sup> This was an important moment that registered the transgressive potential of clothing for Kushner as both a student and artist. Kushner was surprised to discover that such a politically minded campus should also be an environment that reaffirmed, and even enforced, traditional gender roles.<sup>246</sup> It was also meaningful to Kushner’s education as an artist. In order to be taken seriously as an artist, the event suggested, one must not pursue the use of feminine materials or craft.

This moment honed Kushner’s sociological perspective on clothing and gender expectations, which was already forming through his introduction to the writings of sociologist Erving Goffman (1922-1982). In his undergraduate studies, Kushner was drawn to Goffman’s *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), a landmark sociological study that connected everyday social interactions with theatrical performances.<sup>247</sup> For Kushner, Goffman’s study suggested that “what we put on our body is a clueing device” for a number of things, including

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<sup>244</sup> Anderson-Spivy, 17.

<sup>245</sup> Meyers-Kingsley and Morris, 316.

<sup>246</sup> Anderson-Spivy, 16.

<sup>247</sup> See Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 1959).

identity, social status and dominant cultural standards.<sup>248</sup> These influences pushed Kushner to explore the “gentle politicization,” as he calls it, of clothing in his later performances.<sup>249</sup>

Additional meaningful moments that occurred in the artist’s early career can be traced to his time at UCSD. While Kushner continued to explore his interest in clothing, he also participated in his first performance during his sophomore year. The event was staged by the American Happenings artist Allan Kaprow (1927-2006), who became one of Kushner’s greatest performance role models.<sup>250</sup> Kushner had already seen an exhibition of Kaprow’s works at the Pasadena Art Museum in 1967, which opened his eyes to an important instigator of performance art and mixed media practices in postwar American art.<sup>251</sup> Kaprow’s visit to UCSD for a site-specific work on a San Diego beach had a profound influence on Kushner. Unfamiliar with performance practices beyond Kaprow, Kushner began exploring a participatory style of performance in his first show.<sup>252</sup>

The formative experience of participating in a Happening coupled with an environment that both celebrated and challenged the unconventional use of clothing culminated in Kushner’s senior exhibition *Costumes for Moving Bodies* (1971) (fig. 37).<sup>253</sup> Performed at the Mandeville Art Gallery on UCSD’s campus, this event marked Kushner’s first public performance featuring

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<sup>248</sup> Kushner, in interview with the author, April 29, 2016.

<sup>249</sup> Kushner, in interview with the author, April 29, 2016.

<sup>250</sup> Robert Kushner, interview by Lynn Hershman, Stanford University, May 12, 2006, <https://exhibits.stanford.edu/women-art-revolution/catalog/df572ks9097>.

<sup>251</sup> Kushner, in interview with the author, April 29, 2016.

<sup>252</sup> According to the artist, the early canon of performance, particularly by female artists such as Yoko Ono, Carolee Schneemann, and others, remained largely unknown to him at the time he created his late 1960s and early 1970s performances. Kushner, in interview with the author, April 29, 2016.

<sup>253</sup> As Meyers-Kingsley and Morris note, Kushner uses the term *costumes*, rather than clothing, garments, or fashion, to denote the theatrical and fantastical aspect of his sartorial creations. See Meyers-Kingsley and Morris, 322.

sculptural clothing.<sup>254</sup> Prior to the gallery opening, the artist placed his crocheted capes, wigs, and other various garments on the walls. During the exhibition, models covertly posing as guests removed their clothes, put on the costumes, and moved about the room. Outfit swapping frequently occurred and audience members were encouraged to join.<sup>255</sup> The performance, inspired by the spontaneity and impermanence of Kaprow's Happenings, relied on movement, chance and the presence of the nude body.

Performances such as *Costumes for Moving Bodies* suggest that clothing and the nude body served not only as a source of visual and sensual inspiration, but also as a site for questioning social norms during the early years of Kushner's career. The artist observes:

I was always interested in the distinction between what women wear and men wear, and why that is. And then the next step from that [in my thinking] was why we cover certain parts of our body and not others, and modesty, what does that mean, particularly if you're performing naked?<sup>256</sup>

If clothing and personal style were of interest to the artist in the 1960s and 1970s, he certainly was not alone. Commenting on the role of clothing, identity, and expression during these decades, art historian Patricia Briggs notes:

Men with long hair, women with short hair, miniskirts, micro skirts and bra burning—these are but a few indicators of the way in which fashion was a battleground where received ideology concerning gender and sexuality were challenged during the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>257</sup>

Kushner's own experiences in high school with restrictive clothing rules offer some perspective on clothing and personal style as a countercultural medium:

There were dress codes. Boys couldn't have facial hair, your hair couldn't be below your

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<sup>254</sup> Anderson-Spivy, 17.

<sup>255</sup> Meyers-Kingsley and Morris, 323.

<sup>256</sup> Kushner, in conversation with the author, April 29, 2016.

<sup>257</sup> Patricia Briggs, "Pattern Language: Clothing as Communicator," *Senses and Society* 3, no. 1 (2008): 118

collar. Girls had to wear a skirt or a dress. They couldn't wear pants...couldn't wear sandals, even though this was LA. When the counterculture hit, it was a target ripe for being attacked.<sup>258</sup>

In *Costumes for Moving Bodies*, the decision to create outfits that transgressed gender norms and revealed body parts that were typically covered celebrated the erotic qualities of both sexes while challenging social expectations of respectability and good taste.

The exposed body became one of the most defining features of the American counterculture by the end of the 1960s. Young radicals and college students took off their clothes to oppose what they perceived as hypocritical and repressive social customs, and to contest firmly entrenched taboos surrounding the naked body. Artists, too, staged acts of nudity or disrobement to challenge the social systems that sought control of their body's representation. Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* (1964) and Marina Abramović's *Rhythm 0* (1974) utilized the artists' own passive bodies for audience members to manipulate and undress, producing two iconic performances on the topic of female vulnerability.<sup>259</sup> Public acts of nudity like *Anatomic Explosion on Wall Street* (1968), staged by Yayoi Kusama outside of the New York Stock Exchange, put the artist and her nude participants at risk for arrest as they danced naked in protest of America's involvement in Vietnam.<sup>260</sup>

The nude bodies of artists, protesters, hippies and activists became a powerful way to assert resistance against prevailing social standards. In *Eros and Civilization*, Marcuse writes on the liberating potential of art and pleasure in the face of oppression and stifling rationality.

According to Marcuse: "Art challenges the prevailing principle of reason: in representing the

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<sup>258</sup> Kushner, in interview with the author, April 29, 2016.

<sup>259</sup> See Jieun Rhee, "Performing the Other: Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece*," *Art History* 28, no. 1 (February 2005): 96-118 and David J. Getsy, "Acts of Stillness: Statues, Performativity, and Passive Resistance," *Criticism* 56, no. 1 (Winter 2014): 1-20.

<sup>260</sup> See Mignon Nixon, "Anatomic Explosion on Wall Street," *October* 142 (Fall 2012): 3-25.

order of sensuousness, it invokes a tabooed logic—the logic of gratification as against that of repression.”<sup>261</sup> Marcuse wrote extensively on the power of the individual body to become an active force in society, one that struggles against those repressive conditions that hinder expression and happiness. Douglas Kellner’s description of Marcusean subjectivity is worth quoting at length:

Marcuse posits a subjectivity that is evolving, developing, striving for happiness, gratification, and harmony. Such subjectivity is always in process, is never fixed or static, and is thus a creation, an achievement, and a goal and not an absolute metaphysical entity. Marcusean subjectivity is also embodied, gendered, oppositional, and struggles against domination, repression, and oppression, and for freedom and happiness. There is thus nothing essentialist, idealist, or metaphysical, here. Instead, Marcuse’s conception of subjectivity is corporeal, cultivates the aesthetic and erotic dimensions of experience, and strives for gratification and harmonious relations with others and nature. Marcuse’s radical subjectivity is also political, refusing domination and oppression, struggling against conditions which block freedom and happiness.<sup>262</sup>

In Kellner’s reading, Marcuse locates the body as an active site of libidinal and political energy capable of fundamentally transforming society.

As Marcuse’s writings suggest, nudity in the late 1960s was just as much about celebration as it was about resistance. Hippies wielded their nude bodies as a challenge to mainstream American society’s puritanical stance on sex and also as symbols of a liberated sexuality.<sup>263</sup> As scholar Timothy Miller writes, “Nudity was in keeping with the counterculture’s love of bodily pleasure; and, as such, it was not so much about exhibitionism and voyeurism as it was appreciation of the total body.”<sup>264</sup> In his presentation of naked bodies, Kushner transformed a form of public nudity traditionally associated with female visibility into a far more erotic,

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<sup>261</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), 185.

<sup>262</sup> Kellner, 12-13.

<sup>263</sup> Brian Hoffman, *Naked: A Cultural History of American Nudism* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 209.

<sup>264</sup> Miller, 59.



communal and egalitarian event. Although the models in Kushner's performance (and Kushner himself) moved about the room in minimal garments, the performance was far from a striptease. The performers consisted of both male and female performers, both wearing equally revealing costumes. The potential salaciousness of the performance's exhibitionist and voyeuristic qualities were muted even more by the intentionally androgynous garments, which were exchanged by both male and female models. The casual sociability of the event also diffused the room's charged mood, as models conversed with each other and reached out to the audience to participate.

Several scholars have articulately written about the erotic qualities of these early works. Donald Kuspit, for one, writes about the sensual qualities of both the artist's paintings and performances in the following terms: "Each of his works, worn as a costume, is, in effect, an ornament of the body, much as images of relaxed, naked bodies ornament some of his surfaces."<sup>265</sup> He continues, "Kushner's performances in his wall hangings are magical rituals of regeneration, of rejuvenation, of the body."<sup>266</sup> The display of the nude body in Kushner's performance served as a celebration of the body and, at the same time, as an act of flagrant defiance against prevailing aesthetic standards that sought to eliminate the body entirely from artistic experience. The resulting performance was simultaneously confrontational and erotic. Such performances would become even more so when paired with food.

### **Food + Clothing Performances**

Kushner began thinking about food as a performance material shortly after his senior show, in the pursuit of more transient and immaterial forms. *Costumes for Moving Bodies* grew

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<sup>265</sup> Donald Kuspit, "Robert Kushner's Happy Unconscious," in *Robert Kushner*, 27.

<sup>266</sup> Kuspit, 27.

out of his conceptual interest in “the ephemerality of the aesthetic experience.”<sup>267</sup> His desire to eliminate the distance between object and audience necessitated an entirely disintegrable medium. Food seemed like the perfect material for dematerialization –a hallmark of conceptualism Lucy Lippard notably proposed in 1973 – and audience interaction.<sup>268</sup> Food was also a familiar substance with myriad meanings and associations, with many more generated once placed upon the nude body.

Like the nostalgic memory of the madeleine in Marcel Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past*, childhood memories also play an important role in a number of Kushner’s food performances. Reflecting on his early years, Kushner recalls the preparation that went into his mother’s extravagant dinner parties.<sup>269</sup> Food became the social centerpiece of the event, both as a meal and also for its decorative appeal. Kushner recalls his mother’s carved radish rosettes and delicate vegetable crudités, carefully preserved for days in the refrigerator. The lengthened shelf-life of these food items inspired Kushner to preserve his food costumes in similar ways.

Perhaps it is fitting that the rehearsal for Kushner’s first food performance took place at his childhood home, in his parents’ backyard (fig. 38). In preparation for *Costumes Constructed and Eaten*, which would be presented on June 28, 1972 at the Jack Glenn Gallery in Corona del Mar, California, Kushner recruited fifteen friends and acquaintances (ten men and five women) to assist with the construction of his food costumes and participate in the performance. Although Kushner designed the costumes, his friends often embellished the work with their own personalized touches. His mother also helped crochet the net armatures that would support the

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<sup>267</sup> Kushner, in interview with the author, April 29, 2016.

<sup>268</sup> See Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (New York: Praeger, 1973).

<sup>269</sup> Kushner, “Food + Clothing =,” 77.

food.<sup>270</sup> The clothing took some experimenting with cooking processes and materials to create structurally sound and mostly edible garments. With the exception of a hot dog skirt, Kushner used only fruits and vegetables to create such garments as banana skirts, strawberry shirts and celery necklaces.<sup>271</sup> Although ultimately unrealized in the final performance, condiments like mustard, ketchup and guacamole were proposed as makeup in the initial sketches, suggesting a complete edible vision for the performance.

The California performance offers a continuation of Kushner's senior show, *Costumes for Moving Bodies*, in terms of its exchangeable approach to clothing. In a similar setup, Kushner placed the costumes on the walls of the gallery prior to the performance, where the audience could admire them as "lush, deflated objects" that would soon become activated upon the models' bodies (figs. 39-40).<sup>272</sup> However, after the models put on the costumes, they swapped not the garments, but the food that constructed them, first between themselves before sharing with the audience (fig. 41). While food as a material clearly sets *Costumes Constructed and Eaten* apart from Kushner's first show featuring clothing, what remained consistent between these two performances was their emphasis on collaborative production and exchange, as well the androgynous quality of the clothing.

The act of eating, especially eating from the nude body, introduced a new intimacy between the audience and performers that had not existed in his previous work. According to the artist, the primary artistic considerations of this new approach would be the "ephemeral composition of all the costumes together, the observation of their disintegration through the act

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<sup>270</sup> Kushner, "Life in the Produce Aisle," *Art Journal* 54, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 62.

<sup>271</sup> Joyce Wadler, "Asparagus Tops," *Harper's Magazine*, July 1973, 10.

<sup>272</sup> Kushner, "Food + Clothing =", 79.

of eating, and the lingering sense of gustatory titillation.”<sup>273</sup> The final quality underscores the heightened eroticism of Kushner’s work as he thought through the possibilities of edible clothing. The act of exchanging food also introduced a more explicit sense of ritual, as Kushner orchestrated the communion-like sharing of food from model to audience.

For Kushner, the substance of food itself carries similar sensual qualities as the nude body. Rather than seeing food as the decorative element that highlights erotic areas of the naked body, Kushner views this relationship as more equal. In the artist’s queries, food becomes just as much of an active agent in generating potential erotic encounters: “Don’t carrot sticks look more inviting when framing a nipple? And what about a glimpse of hair behind the mesh of a hot-dog apron?”<sup>274</sup> These musings are followed up with Kushner’s claim, “Our reactions to familiar foods change entirely when the food is displayed on a naked body. By shifting the context from plate to torso, the food, unsurprisingly, becomes sensuous and eroticized.”<sup>275</sup> Indeed, the act of eating from a nude body also offers surrealist juxtapositions between the body and the materials that sustain it. Not only does the nude body highlight the erotic qualities of food, but the mere suggestion of incorporation carries erotic undertones. As Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett notes, gastronomy and eroticism share both touch and appetite in common.<sup>276</sup>

The themes of visual and sensory pleasure put forth in Kushner’s first performance featuring food continued in *Robert Kushner and Friends Eat Their Clothes*, which was performed a few months later in New York, Kushner’s new home following his move from San

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<sup>273</sup> Kushner, “Food + Clothing =, 77.

<sup>274</sup> Kushner, “Food + Clothing =,” 77.

<sup>275</sup> Kushner, “Food + Clothing =,” 77.

<sup>276</sup> Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Playing to the Senses: Food as a Performance Medium,” *Performance Research* 4, no. 1 (1999): 2.

Diego. While *Costumes Constructed and Eaten* shares several similarities with the later performance, the format and reception of the California performance were quite different. For one, the presentation of Kushner's garments would channel the theatrical presentation of the runway once he had the opportunity to fully absorb the impact of New York fashion. Kushner became entranced with the world of high couture (fig. 42). He recalls, "Some of my designer friends took me to real fashion shows and I was just astonished at their dimensions, so of course I wanted to try to incorporate them into mine."<sup>277</sup> Kushner's eye for the detailed construction of garments and impressive visual display of runway shows would become important sources for the artist's performances. Although Kushner describes his fashion shows as parodies, his love for particular designers and the craft of fashion remains genuine. In particular, Kushner cites the Spanish fashion designer Cristóbal Balenciaga as "the greatest sculptor of the '50s."<sup>278</sup>

The costumes in *Robert Kushner and Friends Eat Their Clothes* would also change significantly from their previously simple construction. The visual impact of the clothing in this early performance had not reached the level of sophistication he required. Many of the garments still relied on a crocheted armature to support the edibles they carried, which significantly detracted from the sculptural quality of the food itself. The fashion shows in New York expanded Kushner's thinking about more complex designs. They also inspired him to incorporate more descriptive and baroque spoken language into the performance, which Kushner recited while introducing the garments. Outfits included carrot sticks with beet bustle, a nori cape, apricot leather and citrus peel wig, Velveeta epaulettes with bread skirt, and herring vest with garters, to name a few.

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<sup>277</sup> Judith Olch Richards, "Robert Kushner: January 30, 1989. Studio, Union Square," in *Inside the Studio: Two Decades of Talks with Artists in New York* (New York: Independent Curators International, 2004), 59-61.

<sup>278</sup> Richards, "Robert Kushner: January 30, 1989," 59-61.

Although photographs of the original performance are limited to Kushner's own documentation, he recreated several of the outfits for various publications, both shortly after the performance and in later decades. A new piece, entitled *Asparagus Vest*, was made and photographed for *Harper's Magazine* in July 1973 (fig. 43).<sup>279</sup> Around twenty works, some new and others reworked, appeared in a 1995 special edition of *Art Journal* edited by Nina Felshin (figs. 44-45).<sup>280</sup> These images allow for a close study of the garments and their sculptural qualities, as well as their diverse cultural makeup.

The costume designs for the New York performance were sourced from two very different, yet interconnected disciplines: fashion and anthropology. Around this time, Amy Goldin, Kushner's mentor and friend, introduced him to *Self-Decoration in Mount Hagen*, written by the ethnographers Andrew and Marilyn Strathern.<sup>281</sup> Published in 1971, the Stratherns' study explored the habits of self-decoration practiced by the Hageners, a group of people who live in the New Guinea Highlands. The authors' research offered interpretations of the Hageners' self-adornment as an expression of identity and personal creativity. The Hageners made new costumes daily, which spoke to Kushner as both an art form and an activity of everyday life. He was also drawn to the Stratherns' reporting of the Hageners' intermixing of gendered signifiers. Both men and women easily swapped face paint colors and accessories that marked aspects of masculinity or femininity.<sup>282</sup>

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<sup>279</sup> Wadler, 10.

<sup>280</sup> Kushner, "Life in the Produce Aisle," 62-65.

<sup>281</sup> Andrew Strathern and Marilyn Strathern, *Self-Decoration in Mount Hagen* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971).

<sup>282</sup> The Stratherns write, "Without making their decorations exactly like women's, men can incorporate into their costumes elements that stand for values which are in other contexts associated with females; and women can do the same in relation to males. Thus men can wear a profusion of red ochre to make themselves attractive in their kilt wig; the wig itself indicates that they are still male. And women can wear lavish head-dresses for werl dancing,

Kushner's clothing similarly challenged the gendered signifiers of the dominant culture. Although inspired by the Hageners, Kushner's costumes of course echoed the countercultural fashions of his day. By the end of the 1960s, the influence of West Coast hippie fashion had reached New York's underground scene. Artists, musicians, and other creative types donned what Andy Warhol would call the "Pakistani-Indian-international-jet-set-hippie-look," a blousy aesthetic of thrift store clothing and multi-ethnic influences.<sup>283</sup> The ethnographic eclecticism of this look was already undergoing a process of commodification by the early 1970s, as caftans, mumus, gypsy skirts and other designs borrowed from non-Western cultures appeared quickly on the runways and in the pages of fashion magazines. *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar* seized hold of what fashion scholar Linda Welters calls "the natural look," which featured natural materials for clothing and jewelry, earth-toned colors, handcrafted macramé accessories and quilted garments.<sup>284</sup>

There remains a degree of ambiguity regarding where exactly Kushner's spoof is directed. The artist's use of "neo-tribal frou frou," as he refers to it, emphasizes the fashion system's regular co-optation and commodification of non-Western cultures and, referenced in his performance, American subcultures. Yet the fashions of the counterculture, too, were largely derived from multi-ethnic sources. The predominantly white, male and middle-class population that forged the counterculture, as Timothy Miller notes, could easily forego their privileged backgrounds and choose the fashions that fit their image of a romantically impoverished

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which are said to over-shadow them and make them dark like men, but the style and profusion of the feathers and the women's red face paint, differentiate them from men." Strathern and Strathern, 172.

<sup>283</sup> Callie Blackman, "Clothing the Cosmic Counterculture: Fashion and Psychedelia," in *Summer of Love: Psychedelic Art, Social Crisis and Counterculture in the 1960s*, ed. Christoph Grunenberg and Jonathan Harris (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2005), 211.

<sup>284</sup> Linda Welters, "The Natural Look: American Style in the 1970s," *Fashion Theory* 12, no. 4 (2008): 500-507.

lifestyle.<sup>285</sup> Both groups are called out in their use of “primitive” and non-Western sources, although an indicator that Kushner’s critique is intended for the fashion system, and its embrace of the “natural” look, can be discerned through his specific choice of presentation. Although his models appear nearly *au naturel*, scarcely covered in Edenic garments of flora and foodstuffs, the naturalness of the event quickly fades in the highly elaborated and spectacle-driven format of the fashion show. In addition to the over-the-top garments, Kushner’s elaborate descriptions of his outfits and choreographed, stylized movements accentuate the fashion system’s—and, by extension, the art world’s—entrenchment in the market.

Like much of the conceptual art produced during this period, artists like Kushner took aim at institutional and economic structures in the art world by either directly referencing their relationship with such structures or, in some cases, by distancing themselves from them. Artists like Joseph Kosuth, Adrian Piper, Hans Haacke and others began to reject the purely visual qualities of art objects and place greater importance on the artwork’s site, context and framing.<sup>286</sup> Many of these artists, including Kushner, sought to eliminate the material form of the object itself in their resistance to commodification. By destroying his costumes during the performance, which act as both pieces of art and potentially sellable fashions—Kushner clearly rejects the traditional aesthetic and economic propositions of the art world. In other words, if the clothing is destroyed, then so too is the merchandise.

And yet—Kushner chose the fashion show precisely because it is the one event where the primary focus remains entirely on the costumes.<sup>287</sup> His garments provide a unique hybrid of

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<sup>285</sup> Miller, xxiv.

<sup>286</sup> Alexander Alberro, “Reconsidering Conceptual Art,” in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), xvii.

<sup>287</sup> Kushner, “Life in the Produce Aisle,” 64



conceptualism, with their emphasis on dematerialization, and craft, as each object was carefully considered and made with a number of different handwork techniques. The fashion show provided the most spectacular means to call attention to the consumption of commodities and culture, through the most consumable of products—food, and, arguably, the most subjective and discriminating of senses—taste.

### **Food in Art in the 1960s and 1970s**

Food is a highly charged medium, full of social, political and cultural significance. The following sections will explore how food functions in Kushner’s performances, and how it relates to, and departs from, traditional uses of food in contemporaneous art practices. It will pay close attention to food in a performance context, and how it is experienced by involved participants. As Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett proposes in her article “Playing to the Senses: Food as a Performance Medium,” food serves as a “performance medium on the boundaries and at the intersections of the life world and the art world.”<sup>288</sup> The familiarity of food becomes an appropriate vehicle for transforming one’s experience of art and the everyday.

Food has a well-documented history as a subject in Western art history, from Giuseppe Arcimboldo’s imaginative portrait heads composed of fruits and vegetables, to seventeenth-century Dutch still-life paintings and food still-lives of later centuries. The 1960s and 1970s, however, saw a considerable rise of food as a central artistic subject and medium.<sup>289</sup> In the realm of pop art, artists such as Wayne Thiebaud, Andy Warhol, Claes Oldenburg, Roy Lichtenstein and Tom Wesselmann modeled their works after readily available foodstuffs and brandname

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<sup>288</sup> Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 12.

<sup>289</sup> Randy Kennedy, “When Meals Played the Muse,” *New York Times*, February 21, 2007, [http://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/21/dining/21soho.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/21/dining/21soho.html?_r=0).

packages in their representations of American consumer life. Other works from the 1960s utilized food in more active ways. Consider the early use of fat and honey by Joseph Beuys, who used these materials for symbolic ends beginning in the 1960s, and Dieter Roth, whose works in the 1960s and 1970s explored the ephemerality of art by following the transformational decay of food.<sup>290</sup> Or the live events of Allan Kaprow, a key inspiration for Kushner, who in his *Happening Household* (1964), orchestrated young female performers to lick jam off a car. New York also saw Kaprow's *Eat* environments in the Bronx (1964), which allowed viewers to wander through makeshift caves, asking silent volunteers or climbing ladders for food, including bread, bananas, apples and potatoes.<sup>291</sup> Carolee Schneemann's iconic *Meat Joy* (1964) involved semi-nude performers rolling around in a mixture of paint and animal flesh, and Paul McCarthy's visceral 1970s performances featured hot dogs and condiments in violent and grotesque acts. In tandem with the women's liberation movement, feminist artists created works that highlighted the domestic labor of women surrounding food. Installations and new media works included the collaborative work *Womanhouse* (1972), led by Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro, Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party* (1974-1979), and Martha Rosler's *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975). These are but a few examples to illustrate the prevalence of food as a physical, social, and symbolic material in contemporary art practices.

Food was readily used by artists as a performance material for its connections to consumption, sustenance and social relations. As Kirschenblatt-Gimblett writes:

The materiality of food, its dynamic and unstable character, its precarious position between sustenance and garbage, its relationship to the mouth and the rest of the body,

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<sup>290</sup> Fat was first used by Beuys as an artistic material in *Fat Corners* (1960, 1962), while honey was first used in *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* (1965). For more on Dieter Roth, see Dirk Dobke's edited volume *Dieter Roth: Books and Multiples* (London: Edition Hansjörg Mayer, 2004).

<sup>291</sup> See Michael Kirby's "Allan Kaprow's 'Eat,'" *Tulane Drama Review* 10, no. 2 (Winter 1965): 44-49.

particularly the female body, and its importance to community, make it a powerful performance medium.<sup>292</sup>

Nonetheless, food rarely was used as a vehicle for spontaneous audience participation.

For such precedents, one needs to turn to certain collaborative food-based projects taking place during the 1960s and 1970s. One of the major forces in food-based art during this time was Daniel Spoerri (b. 1930). Known for his involvement with the French Nouveau Réalisme group, Spoerri's engagement with food ranged from small "trap-paintings" (the remnants of a meal affixed to canvases and displayed in assemblage form) to large-scale banquets. Spoerri coined the term "Eat Art" to refer to such food-based projects that emphasized the merging of food experimentation and everyday experience. While Spoerri is well-known for his founding of Eat-Art Restaurant (1968-1971) and Eat-Art Gallery (1970-1971) in Düsseldorf, he also staged international artist banquets. One memorable event, *29 Variations on a Meal: Eaten By*, occurred at the Allan Stone Gallery in New York in 1964 (fig. 46).<sup>293</sup> This banquet brought numerous artists and performers, including Arman, Marcel Duchamp, Allan Kaprow, Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol, among others, to the gallery space. Each artist arrived separately and dined alone on a meal prepared by Spoerri. Their leftovers later became trap paintings and were displayed in the gallery, signed by the artists, and certified by Spoerri as original works of art.<sup>294</sup> Such a performance allowed Spoerri to explore the "gastronomic and physiological worlds of consumption," both in the art world and in everyday life.<sup>295</sup> Furthermore, the performance

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<sup>292</sup> Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 11.

<sup>293</sup> Novero, 145.

<sup>294</sup> Novero, 163-164.

<sup>295</sup> Novero, 145.

investigated the collective production of an artwork and the social experience of a meal—in this case curtailed through the isolated activity of eating alone.

While the 1964 performance of *29 Variations on a Meal: Eaten By* may not have been known to Robert Kushner, who was still in California and yet to formally enter into his studies at UCSD, it was likely familiar to Gordon Matta-Clark. Slightly older than Kushner and based in New York City, Matta-Clark would focus on the production and consumption of food in one of his largest collaborative projects, FOOD (fig. 47). Along with his partner Carol Goodden, Matta-Clark opened FOOD in 1971 as a conceptual yet operational SoHo restaurant. The timing was fortuitous for Kushner, who became the restaurant’s dessert chef and manager between 1972 and 1974.<sup>296</sup>

### **Collective Influences: FOOD and SoHo**

Located in New York’s SoHo neighborhood, an abbreviation of South of Houston Street, FOOD belonged to the emerging artists’ district in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Young artists like Matta-Clark played a central role in establishing co-op galleries and alternative spaces in SoHo at this time.<sup>297</sup> The term “raw” emerges fairly frequently in the literature in regards to the physical space of SoHo. In his essay “Alternative: Space,” Martin Beck observes:

“Raw”—with its connotations of natural, crude, unrefined, unprocessed, rough, unfinished—became a metaphor for freedom from restrictive definitions of art making, alluding to a frontier state where boundaries are negotiated and challenged and where space is explored and extended.<sup>298</sup>

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<sup>296</sup> Lori Waxman, “The Banquet Years: FOOD, a SoHo Restaurant,” *Gastronomica: The Journal of Critical Food Studies* 8, no. 4 (Fall 2008): 28.

<sup>297</sup> Alan W. Moore, “Artists’ Collectives: Focus on New York, 1975-2000,” in *Collectivism After Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination after 1945*, ed. Blake Stimson and Gregory Sholette (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 201.

<sup>298</sup> Martin Beck, “Alternative: Space,” in *Alternative Art, New York, 1965-1985*, ed. Julie Ault (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 254-55.

Beck's use of the word "raw" to describe avant-garde practices and the spaces in which they took place provides an interesting parallel to Claude Lévi-Strauss's structuralist study *The Raw and the Cooked* (1964), in which the author explores the symbolic nature of food and cooking practices in Western culture.<sup>299</sup> Extending Beck's evaluation of the gritty urban spaces of radical artists in New York to an institutional context, then the "cooked" spaces of established museums and galleries served as conservative spaces limiting avant-garde activity.

If Spoerri's projects highlighted the solitude of both eating and artistic creation, FOOD did just the opposite, as it became an important support system for young artists in SoHo, including Kushner. Not only did FOOD fulfill basic everyday needs, but it also provided a creative space for artists who exhibited together and collaborated on projects. The flexible hours and creative environment of FOOD made it naturally appealing to artists. Kushner himself writes that he worked late in the day, which allowed him several uninterrupted hours to focus on his art. In addition to employing artists and serving them, FOOD also became a venue for young artists to congregate and participate in food-based happenings. A weekly feature of the restaurant included guest chef-artist dinners on Sunday nights. Robert Rauschenberg, Donald Judd, Yvonne Rainer, and many other artists reportedly participated in creating themed meals.<sup>300</sup> Often these meals featured experimental, conceptual and unusual cuisine for the time. One example includes Matta-Clark's "Matta Bones" meal, which featured oxtail soup, bone marrow and frogs legs on the menu. After the meal, holes were drilled in the bones which were strung together for diners to wear home.<sup>301</sup> While artists easily turned meals into artistic events, even as a functional

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<sup>299</sup> See Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked*, trans. John and Doreen Weightman (New York: Harper and Row, 1969).

<sup>300</sup> Waxman, 29.

<sup>301</sup> Waxman, 2.

restaurant, FOOD became a performative space. FOOD was one of the first restaurants to feature an open kitchen, which enabled diners to view the act of preparing the day's meals (fig. 48). Mundane acts of preparation and service could be viewed as part of a complete food experience by those who visited.<sup>302</sup>

The restaurant's lively space, as well as the collective spirit of SoHo, finds multiple anchors in *Robert Kushner and Friends Eat Their Clothes*. Kushner met several of the models he recruited for the performance at FOOD and during a previous visit to New York in 1970. As in the case of the California performance, most of the models were friends or acquaintances. The menu of FOOD also sustained Kushner creatively as well as practically, as Kushner sourced his edible clothing materials from the restaurant's stock. The large quantities of food he came into contact with in FOOD's kitchen freed him up to experiment with new materials in large quantities.<sup>303</sup> Prior to the performances, Kushner returned any unused food to the restaurant, where it was used to prepare meals.<sup>304</sup>

The gratis access to food and generosity shown towards employees underscore several aspects of FOOD's countercultural philosophy. FOOD's emphasis on a communal working space for artists offers yet another. The emphasis on communal living resonates with broader social trends of the decade, particularly the rise of communitarian living and the proliferation of co-ops. These collectives were typically created by those who sought living conditions, goods and services in an alternative model to the capitalist economic system.<sup>305</sup> While FOOD was not

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<sup>302</sup> Natasha Hoare, "Matta-Clark's Food," *The Gourmand* 2 (2013): 41.

<sup>303</sup> Kushner, in interview with the author, April 29, 2016.

<sup>304</sup> Waxman, 28.

<sup>305</sup> Craig Cox, *Storefront Revolution: Food Co-ops and the Counterculture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 4.

entirely a co-op, it also wasn't a strictly for-profit enterprise, as it freely gave meals and materials to those who worked and met there.<sup>306</sup> Furthermore, the food supply of the restaurant was largely sourced from city markets and commune farms with a background of presumably equitable labor.

Augmenting Kushner's experience at FOOD and countercultural trends of the late 1960s was the growing food consciousness that originated in California and expanded across the United States by the early 1970s. The year 1971 saw the publication of *Diet for a Small Planet*, written by Frances Moore Lappé at UC-Berkeley, just a few years after Kushner's studies at UCSD concluded. Lappé's call for an ecologically and nutritionally mindful approach to eating became influential with the decade's established youth movement. She thoughtfully reflected on the need for a "relational worldview" that acknowledges an "awareness of our own environment is also awareness of a 'commons'—a reality on which we share dependency and therefore mutual responsibility, a commons which defies division into individual goods."<sup>307</sup> Later publications such as Catherine Lerza and Michael Jacobson's *Food for People, Not for Profit* (1975) further galvanized the cause of ecologically minded consumption by examining the political, economic and health-related consequences of the American food industry.<sup>308</sup>

While FOOD was not a vegetarian restaurant, it did follow various ethical and economical choices for its menu, including macrobiotic diets and using the less expensive off-cuts of meat.<sup>309</sup> The materials Kushner chose for his first performance featuring food costumes

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<sup>306</sup> Moore, 202.

<sup>307</sup> Frances Moore Lappé, *Diet for a Small Planet*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1991), xxvi-xvii.

<sup>308</sup> Catherine Lerza and Michael Jacobson, eds. *Food for People, Not for Profit* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1975).

<sup>309</sup> Kushner, in interview with the author, April 29, 2016.

were primarily vegetarian, which reflected the artist's conscientiousness towards ethical environmental issues, including the avoidance of animal cruelty and support of sustainable farming practices. His later work would feature whatever materials he could source for free from the restaurant—often using unpopular cast-off cuts, such as calves' tongues, for his costumes.

Much like the creation of a meal, *Robert Kushner and Friends Eat Their Clothes* touches on not only the collective production of an artwork, but also the larger context of its social experience. In their anthropological discussion of food, Carole Counihan and Penny van Esterik describe the act of eating as “an endlessly evolving enactment of gender, family, and community relationships.”<sup>310</sup> Describing the conceptual origins of these performance pieces, Kushner claims them as “a synthesis of two of humankind's basic needs—clothing and sustenance—in a most provocative context.”<sup>311</sup> One might further add community and commensality as just as intrinsic, particularly for the “deeply social, communitarian ethos” that characterized SoHo in the 1970s, in which *Robert Kushner and Friends Eat Their Clothes*, Matta-Clark's FOOD restaurant, and other “raw” performances and events were cooked.<sup>312</sup>

Kushner describes the free-spirited culture of the restaurant largely as a product of Gordon Matta-Clark's influence, who had, for better or worse, essentially lost interest in FOOD by the time Kushner arrived. According to the artist, “Carol [Goodden], to her credit, really wanted [the restaurant] to support the community. So by the time I was there, there was no emphasis on weird, conceptual dinners. We just wanted to make good food.”<sup>313</sup> Matta-Clark's

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<sup>310</sup> Carole Counihan and Penny van Esterik, “Introduction,” in *Food and Culture: A Reader*, ed. Carole Counihan and Penny van Esterik (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), 1.

<sup>311</sup> Kushner, “Life in the Produce Aisle,” 62.

<sup>312</sup> Pamela M. Lee, *Object to Be Destroyed: The Work of Gordon Matta-Clark* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 68.

<sup>313</sup> Lee, 68.



influence on the restaurant had waned around 1971, around the time that Kushner would transform FOOD into an economically viable establishment. According to the artist, the restaurant would not break even until his own tenure as manager.<sup>314</sup> He, too, left shortly after, tiring of his managerial responsibilities and wanting to spend more time on his art, suggesting that the transformation of FOOD from a cooperative-like gathering space to an established restaurant tracks with the end of an era that produced such anti-establishment alternatives.

### **Alternative Aesthetics: Food and Taste**

The influence of FOOD, as well as the collective spirit of artistic communities in New York at the time, had a pronounced impact on Kushner and his approach towards an alternate aesthetics of food and taste. In my final section, I would like to explore these two subjects in Kushner's performance by offering two broad questions about social experience and the senses. First, how does the act of eating and the concept of taste shape one's understanding of an artwork? And secondly, how can food and clothing be used as vehicles for social engagement? Let us take as a starting point the words of philosopher Barbara Formis, who notes:

Much more than observing a painting, or even observing the beauty of food in one's plate, eating is an active and embodied experience, deeply separated from the contemplative distance that characterizes the aesthetic phenomenon in its conventional understanding.<sup>315</sup>

Although food-based art has recently gained recognition and acceptance within the art world, the gustatory and aesthetic notions of taste have long been debated in philosophical texts. Intellectual discussion of taste as a lesser sense emerged in the late eighteenth century in

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<sup>314</sup> Kushner, in interview with the author, April 29, 2016.

<sup>315</sup> Barbara Formis, "Eating as Aesthetic Experience," in *Practicing Pragmatist Aesthetics: Critical Perspectives on the Arts*, ed. Wojciech Malecki (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2014), 172.

Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*.<sup>316</sup> According to Kant, taste and other senses aligned with physical experience should not be seen as reliable criteria for judging aesthetic beauty, as they occupy a more subjective position than pure intellect. The alignment of taste with pleasure, according to Kant, obscures one's objective evaluation of aesthetic merit.

As Formis points out, the experience of eating in an artistic context differs significantly from one that emphasizes a sensory experience historically privileged in Western aesthetics, namely sight and hearing.<sup>317</sup> Much scholarship has sought to redress taste's devaluation in Western aesthetics, including art historian Caroline A. Jones' edited volume *Sensorium: Embodied Experience, Technology, and Contemporary Art* (2006), which explores different sensory modes of artistic engagement in the last half century.<sup>318</sup> The devaluation of taste within the hierarchy of the senses has also been studied in anthropological and sociological fields, particularly in Carolyn Korsmeyer's *Making Sense of Taste: Food and Philosophy* (1999).<sup>319</sup>

Taste remains a central concept in both aesthetics and the formation of self. In his notable critique of Kant, the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (1984), contends that taste is a learned behavior predicated on social class, rather than a predetermined sense. Gustatory and aesthetic taste are therefore both strong

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<sup>316</sup> Immanuel Kant writes, "Everyone must allow that a judgment on the beautiful which is tinged with the slightest interest, is very partial and not a pure judgment of taste. One must not be in the least prepossessed in favor of the existence of the thing, but must preserve complete indifference in this respect, in order to play the part of judge in matters of taste." See Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. James Creed Meredith, 1781 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 38. See also Kant's "Objective and Subjective Senses: The Sense of Taste," *The Taste Culture Reader*, ed. Carolyn Korsmeyer (New York: Berg Publishing, 2005), 209-214.

<sup>317</sup> Sara Danius, *The Senses of Modernism: Technology, Perception, and Aesthetics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 194.

<sup>318</sup> See Caroline A. Jones, "The Mediated Sensorium," in *Sensorium: Embodied Experience, Technology, and Contemporary Art*, ed. Caroline A. Jones (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006).

<sup>319</sup> Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Making Sense of Taste: Food and Philosophy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999). See also Korsmeyer's "Delightful, Delicious, Disgusting," in *Food & Philosophy: Eat, Drink, and Be Merry*, ed. Fritz Allhoff and Dave Monroe (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 145-161.

indicators of class.<sup>320</sup> Due to its subjective nature, taste also allows people to determine their likes and dislikes. Art critic Peter Schjeldahl posits taste as both a regular feature of social life as well as a means to assert individuality. He continues: “Just as my mouth administers passage of matter between the outside and the inside of my body, my ‘taste’ regulates a balance of rights and powers between my being and that of everything and everybody that aren’t me.”<sup>321</sup> As these examples show, taste serves as both a uniquely individual and also socially conditioned process. The act of eating also plays an important role in the formation of identities and social relationships, as food marks “social differences, boundaries, bonds, and contradictions.”<sup>322</sup>

Like the permeable borders of audience and object in *Robert Kushner and Friends Eat Their Clothes*, taste as a sensory experience merges with taste as an aesthetic sensibility. If consumption of art and culture serve as an indicator of taste, as Pierre Bourdieu proposes, then Kushner’s revels in a taste that doesn’t exclude or confine. His intentional use of campy sources—his fondness for pineapple bras, fringe vests, and hot dog skirts, for example, used on both sexes interchangeably—revels in bad taste as they buck gender norms.

Kushner’s delight in bad taste connects him with the generation of artists of the early 1970s who challenged the traditional sensibilities of modern art, particularly the notions of artistic purity, medium specificity and opticality advocated by the American art critic Clement Greenberg and, later, Michael Fried. As a tremendously influential voice for postwar American painting, Greenberg championed Abstract Expressionists whose works were best suited to a strictly visual reading. His formalist approach prioritized an artwork’s optical qualities, rather

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<sup>320</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 79.

<sup>321</sup> Schjeldahl, 20.

<sup>322</sup> Counihan and van Esterik, 1.

than its subject matter or narrative, as the most important indicator of quality. Even after the art world had shifted its attention to the representational and commercial imagery of pop art and the non-object tendencies of conceptual art and minimalism in the 1960s, Greenberg maintained his belief in the separation of high art from the representational imagery of mass culture, and the centrality of aesthetic taste for most of his career. Writing in *Art News* in 1973, Greenberg commented on that decade's artists as a group who "confidently dismiss taste as irrelevant."<sup>323</sup> The statement reveals a blind spot in Greenberg's thinking—artists like Kushner were indeed thinking of taste, just not the kind Greenberg advocated for and argued art should uphold.

The concept of bad taste as an aesthetic judgment remains a central one in Kushner's art, in both his performances, paintings and artistic vocabulary. Consider the following quote from Alexandra Anderson-Spivy's excellent monograph *Robert Kushner: Gardens of Earthly Delight* (1997), which illustrates the point:

Bad art and bad taste were instrumental in liberalizing stereotypes and loosening the boundaries of social and personal behavior. The subversive celebration of bad taste in Kushner's early New York performance work expressed his wish to perform artistic alchemy—to transform what was cheap and vulgar into something luxuriously, unexpectedly beautiful.<sup>324</sup>

Even the artist himself has playfully claimed the motto, "Bad taste is timeless. Why? Because it never goes out of style."<sup>325</sup>

Kushner's performances also arrived in the aftermath of Michael Fried's memorable 1967 essay "Art and Objecthood," published in *Artforum* six years prior to Greenberg's text. Continuing Greenberg's interest in the autonomy of the art object, Fried disparaged those artists

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<sup>323</sup> Clement Greenberg, "Can Taste Be Objective?" *Art News* 72 (February 1973): 22.

<sup>324</sup> Anderson-Spivy, 26.

<sup>325</sup> Robert Kushner, "Robert Kushner" (artist's website), accessed November 10, 2014, <http://www.robertkushnerstudio.com/books/wonnerful-world-of-food/>.

who emphasized “theatricality” in artistic encounters, a term used to characterize works that demanded the presence of a viewer.<sup>326</sup> Any form that required a physical encounter with a viewer to complete its meaning was no longer a work of art, but an act of theater, and theater, according to Fried, was the “negation of art.”<sup>327</sup>

The fashion show format of Kushner’s performance and interaction with audience members blatantly pushes it into theatrical territory. Far from a negation of art, theater expanded its boundaries. Theatre in fact served as a primary influence for the artist. In addition to his childhood experiences with clothing, one can trace influences for Kushner’s performances from theatrical experiences in the artist’s adolescence, when he worked as a volunteer usher at Melodyland Theatre, a theatre in the round in Anaheim. In one particularly memorable event for a teenaged Kushner, he recalls seeing a French revue titled *Vive Les Girls*.<sup>328</sup> An ad from the local newspaper boasted a \$250,000 budget, as well as costumes and stage décor directly from Paris.<sup>329</sup> The orchestrated performance featured topless female performers in big headdresses and flowing gowns. Despite the strict age limit, Kushner managed to sneak a seat and watch the second act. The interest in the women’s outfit designs reoccurred to him while making his edible costumes at a later date. According to the artist:

The idea of cutting away things that are normally there to cover what’s supposed to be covered came from this extremely tacky, extremely sexist and inappropriate source...Being in the round, they would sort of do this fashion show and then at the end of each section they’d walk down the aisles.<sup>330</sup>

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<sup>326</sup> Michael Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” *Artforum* 5 (June 1967): 15.

<sup>327</sup> Fried, 15.

<sup>328</sup> Kushner, in interview with the author, April 29, 2016.

<sup>329</sup> “Kaye Stevens to Play Role in *Vive Les Girls*,” *Pasadena Independent*, November 4, 1966.

<sup>330</sup> Kushner, in interview with the author, April 29, 2016.

The encounter was integral to Kushner's formations of entertainment, spectacle and bad taste. Rather than using bad taste to offend, it was used as a strategy to question appropriate aesthetic presentation and to pull people in through humor and erotic energy.

The New York performance of *Robert Kushner and Friends Eat Their Clothes* offers one opportunity to study performance practices that incorporate food and clothing in a particular time and place—in this case, SoHo in the early 1970s. However, far from being constant, audience experience—like taste—is subject to change, particularly when one reflects on the social, psychological and sexual considerations of eating food from another person's nude body. This begs the question, what kinds of social encounters were produced in this particular performance, and how did they change in different contexts? The rest of this section will explore both the precedents for and reincarnations of the artist's food and clothing performances in an attempt to understand how audience reception differed due to time and place.

The California and New York versions of the show varied not only in their fashion show styling, but also in their audience's interaction. The California performance took place in a room full of friends and family members, with a decidedly friendly rapport between the models and audience. Kushner recalls, "It was kind of like a late post-hippie happening feeling. I don't really like that terminology, but it was kind of new age feeling like we were all equal. It was an egalitarian mood, or so I perceived."<sup>331</sup> On the other hand, Kushner describes the New York's Greene Street loft as an entirely different physical space—a large and crowded room, with limited visibility. Due to the *Village Voice* promotion, there were too many people for the room, many of whom Kushner and the performers did not know. Describing the New York audience, Kushner recollected that audience members were there "to be titillated rather than be

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<sup>331</sup> Kushner, in interview with the author, April 29, 2016.

participatory in a kind of gentler way.”<sup>332</sup> Although there were no extreme instances, Kushner recalls that the models were exhausted after the show and described feeling somewhat harassed during the performance. He notes:

It was enough to make me stop and think, ‘What am I really doing? What are my assumptions? What are my expectations of an audience? How can I control an audience’s relationship to this highly charged situation of a naked person in there?’<sup>333</sup>

Such a reaction from the audience indicates an important difference in perception and treatment of the performers between the two locations. While the California performance featured the nude body as a symbol of liberation and egalitarianism, the nude body in the New York performance opened the doors for objectification and vulnerability. In light of these inhospitable conditions, Kushner would make future performance events largely by invitation only.

While the end date of the American counterculture movement remains debated, historians generally cite a series of economic and political events occurring between 1969 and 1970 as advancing the counterculture’s rapid decline. In his introduction to *Imagine Nation: The American Counterculture of the 1960s and ‘70s*, Michael William Doyle describes these events and their impact on the counterculture’s utopian aspirations:

The economic downturn that began in the very early 1970s, combined with Nixon’s election to office on a ‘law and order,’ anti-counterculture platform, dealt Sixties utopians a double dose of harsh reality...The counterculture fragmented into a number of cultural liberation movements during the 1970s that were different in tone and constituency. Expectations ebbed that American society could be radically altered, whether by politics, revolution, or alchemy, while at the same time ‘practical liberation’ on the level of lifestyle became the countercultural model.”<sup>334</sup>

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<sup>332</sup>Kushner, in interview with the author, April 29, 2016.

<sup>333</sup> Kushner, in interview with the author, April 29, 2016.

<sup>334</sup> Michael William Doyle, “Historicizing the American Counterculture of the 1960s and ‘70s,” in *Imagine Nation: The American Counterculture of the 1960s and ‘70s*, ed. Peter Braunstein and Michael William Doyle (New York: Routledge, 2002), 12.

Although it would be speculative to claim that the tonal shift in the earlier California performance and the later New York version was due entirely to geographic differences, it is not entirely implausible to suggest some affinity existed between Kushner's performances and the changes in countercultural attitudes that had become perceptible by the end of the 1960s.

Commenting on the beat generation of the previous decade, Herbert Marcuse summed up the hazards of radical opposition to mainstream culture in his 1964 text *One-Dimensional Man*: "But such modes of protest are no longer contradictory to the status quo and no longer negative. They are rather the ceremonial part of practical behaviorism, its harmless negation, and are quickly digested by the status quo as part of its healthy diet."<sup>335</sup> Marcuse's prescient words easily translate to the countercultural moment, an anti-establishment movement which inevitably became commoditized and incorporated into the dominant culture by the 1970s. Kushner's later performance marks a significant shift in reception, one that arguably reflects on a symbolic level an era already feeling the fallout of the counterculture's utopian vision.

### **Leftovers: An Epilogue of Robert Kushner's Food-Based Performances and Writings**

Food and clothing remained lifelong muses for Kushner, even after he abandoned performance art for painting and other two-dimensional formats. As an addendum to the previous sections, I would like to touch briefly on several related projects Kushner staged after *Robert Kushner and Friends Eat Their Clothes* that further explore his use of food and clothing as objects of playful desire for his performers and audience alike. This final section also explores the time- and place-bound nature of performance art, as elaborated in Peggy Phelan's

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<sup>335</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (New York: Beacon Press, 1964), 14.



theorization of performance practices, in relation to Kushner's restaged version of *Robert Kushner and Friends Eat Their Clothes* in 2010.

Kushner continued to stage fashion shows in his later performances, even if food was no longer his material of choice. Beginning in 1974, Kushner created a series of "lines" inspired by couture styles and fashion magazines like *Vogue*, *Harper's Bazaar* and *Seventeen*.<sup>336</sup> One of these was his "New York Hat Line" series, first presented in January 1975 and later published in 1979. Kushner created twenty five hats paired with descriptions. Many of his designs incorporated kitchen utensils (pot lids, salad bowls), were named after various meals (*Dinner in Bed* and *Breakfast Bonnet*), or were dedicated to foods, such as his "Cheese Line" category. The language Kushner and collaborator Ed Friedman use to describe these hats evokes the humorously erotic tone that underscores much of Kushner's art. As an example, consider the artist's description of a hat entitled *Pink Serenade*:

This bulbous beret of single-crochet cotton in you-guessed-it raspberry pink swells to a formidable deca-bump humped by an extruded creamy blue starfish and climaxing in a prismatic pink satin Istanbuli amulet in cotton lurex crochet. And finally more pink from temples to elbow cascading in bunches of satiny ice-creamed pink ribbons.<sup>337</sup>

Much like his send-up of fashion shows, Kushner also experimented with humorous parodies of cookbooks. While Frances Moore Lappé's *Diet for a Small Planet* featured illustrations by Marika Hahn Robert of nutritious and eco-friendly meals, Kushner and Amy Goldin created their own illustrated cookbook, featuring a mix of cheap ingredients and comical pairings. Entitled *The Wonnerful World of Food* (1978), the book is divided into chapters of different menu offerings, much like a French cookbook (i.e. Hors d'Oeuvres, Soupes, Poissons, etc.). In their introductory remarks, the authors comment that the recipes were drawn from

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<sup>336</sup> Robert Kushner and Ed Friedman, *The New York Hat Line* (New York: Bozeaux of London Press, 1979), n.p.

<sup>337</sup> Kushner and Friedman, n.p.

published sources, and that none were pre-tested by readers, in order to “offer you the delight and adventure of fun dining.”<sup>338</sup> Most recipes seem purely for sly provocation, and with bodily forms in mind (see *Candlestick Salad*, p. 53). Recipes include illustrations and deadpan comments, such as “If you’ve never had toast, try it with creamed eggplant. You will want to have it often.”<sup>339</sup> If the *Wonnerful World of Food* offered a satirical take on the seriousness of French cookery, it also poked fun at the ecologically minded ethos of 1970s food culture.

The language of food even finds its way into the artist’s working process. Consider this later interview, given after mostly abandoning performance, in which Kushner says a few words about his painting process. According to the artist, “I almost always work flat, and I do all the drawing on the floor. I thin the paint down to a kind of milky consistency, like buttermilk—I dislike gratuitous drips.”<sup>340</sup> Decades after the first performance, the evocative and erotic language of food continues to find its way into the artist’s vocabulary.

After the initial staging of *Robert Kushner and Friends Eat Their Clothes* in 1972, the artist created variations of the performance on several different occasions. The performances remained popular immediately after 1972, as well as decades later, particularly with arts organizations and publications. The first commission for an edible performance occurred in March 1974, when Kushner was approached by *Art Rite*, a downtown New York art journal. The organization requested a scaled down version of the original performance for a cocktail party benefit. Kushner created six costumes, this time more elaborate than his previous efforts.<sup>341</sup>

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<sup>338</sup> Amy Goldin and Robert Kushner, *Wonnerful World of Food: 50 Funny Recipes* (New York: Sweet Sixteen C. Publications, 1978), 7.

<sup>339</sup> Goldin and Kushner, 7.

<sup>340</sup> Richards, 60.

<sup>341</sup> Kushner, “Food + Clothing,” 82.

Outfits included an herb coat with fresh dill, mint, chive and parsley, a mushroom cummerbund, and a bridal outfit (typical at the end of couture fashion shows) composed of strewn bananas and strawberries.<sup>342</sup>

While he responded positively to the more sophisticated quality of the costumes and their presentation, the impact of the performance was weakened for Kushner. According to the artist:

Showing them in a room of suited patrons sipping white wine created a strangely distant experience, as there was no audience interaction. We were separated from our viewers and consequently ended up feeling like the hired help, sampling our own costumes but missing participation from our remote audience.<sup>343</sup>

The lack of audience participation had a significant impact on the piece, as the original performance's participatory spirit was integral in activating both the clothing and the audience's multisensory experience.

In 2010, nearly four decades after its original staging at 28 Greene Street Loft, Kushner revisited *Robert Kushner and Friends Eat Their Clothes* in New York. Invited by the food studies journal *Gastronomica*, for whom he had previously written an article about his food-based art, Kushner staged a public performance featuring several reworked costumes at the Astor Center in New York.<sup>344</sup> The differences between the 1972 and 2010 performance are considerable. For one, Kushner did not participate as one of the nude models himself. Nudity had long since lost its appeal to the artist, who served as an emcee for the event, calling out the costume titles and materials rather than wearing one himself. Although Kushner had always orchestrated these performances, his earlier participation as one of the models lessened the

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<sup>342</sup> Kushner, "Food + Clothing," 82.

<sup>343</sup> Kushner, "Food + Clothing," 82.

<sup>344</sup> Audio for this performance is available at the artist's website:  
<http://www.robertkushnerstudio.com/videos/robert-kushner-friends-eat-their-clothes/>.

distance between himself, the audience, and his fellow performers. Additionally, in the 2010 performance, those who did wear his costumes were models rather than friends. According to the artist, the emphasis on beautiful bodies became more apparent, producing a self-consciousness that was not necessarily as palpable in the 1970s.<sup>345</sup> The models also were not involved in customizing their costumes.

Perhaps the most significant difference between the two performances occurred at the end, after the performers had each modelled their garments. Rather than erupting in a spontaneous feast, Kushner instead encouraged the audience to not eat the costumes. The event became more carefully managed and less social as a result. The artist claims the audience in fact wanted to eat (a surprise to him), and that it could have gone much further. However, the aggressive audience of the 1972 show still worried him. He tried to correct this in the *Gastronomica* performance by limiting audience and performer interaction, perhaps to a fault in terms of creating a dynamic and social event. In hindsight, Kushner deems these performances less successful than his original performances.

In *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, Peggy Phelan advances the idea that “in performance art spectatorship there is an element of consumption: there are no left-overs, the gazing spectator must try to take everything in.”<sup>346</sup> Such phrasing likens the act of experiencing a performance to a meal itself, where one must devour every sensation before the event ends. For Phelan, it is this “non-reproductive” quality of live performance that distinguishes it from other forms of commodifiable, object-based art, granting it a singular power of expression and immediacy. But what happens when an event is repeated (reheated?) years later, as in the case of

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<sup>345</sup> Kushner, in interview with the author, April 29, 2016.

<sup>346</sup> Phelan, *Unmarked*, 148.

Kushner's *Gastronomica* hosted performance? Here Phelan's use of "left-overs" is particularly apt to describe both the food that formed the material and conceptual substance of the performance and its diluted secondary appearance. Far from implying any kind of uniform social experience, Kushner's food and clothing performances differed dramatically across time and place. According to the artist, the 1972 performance seemed time appropriate and, perhaps because of this, did not necessarily translate to the social and cultural climate of the last decade. The "Elysian idealism" of the early 1970s created an environment unfettered by the taboo of nudity and a transformative approach to clothing as a social and material form. He observes, "It was channeling a mood that was in the air" that was no longer present in the 2010 performance, suggesting that the social atmosphere of the earlier performances, fractured themselves in audience reception, proved just as ephemeral as the clothing.<sup>347</sup>

Nevertheless, the use of food and clothing in art serve as ideal subjects for cultural study. As Pierre Bourdieu wrote in his seminal sociological study *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, "Food...is itself related to clothing as inside to outside, the domestic to the public, being to seeming."<sup>348</sup> Both forms easily cross between private and public, as well as individual and collective, to enable alternative forms of aesthetic experience and sensory engagement. As the changing reception of Kushner's performance suggests, they also offer perspective on shifting social relationships and cultural values. Kushner's original food performances incorporated strategies that were deeply connected to the spirit of the American counterculture, including collaboration, collectivity and opposition to mainstream attitudes on gender roles, nudity and self-expression. Much like the works of Atsuko Tanaka and Hélio

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<sup>347</sup> Kushner, in interview with the author, April 29, 2016.

<sup>348</sup> Bourdieu, 200.

Oiticica, Kushner's performances also worked against prevailing aesthetic standards that attempted to eliminate the body and non-visual senses from a shared experience of art. Kushner's interactive use of food and clothing crossed social and sensory boundaries as it fought for a liberation of style from taste, art from sight, and both food and clothing from their everyday uses. Ultimately, the communal bacchanalia of *Robert Kushner and Friends Eat Their Clothes* offers creative and challenging new ways to think about the senses and participatory strategies in contemporary performance-based practices in a tantalizing pair of subjects.

## Epilogue: Continuing Threads

Since the mid-1970s, the presence of clothing in installations, performances, and participatory practices has continued to blossom in the realm of international contemporary art. This epilogue will discuss the works of both established and emerging artists who share in the sartorial experimentations of Atsuko Tanaka, Hélio Oiticica and Robert Kushner, three artists considered in this dissertation as foundational figures who developed new forms of engagement with clothing through multisensory experience. As proposed in this study, each artist's singular form of synaesthetic dress explored clothing as a connective material between bodies, social spaces, and histories. The epilogue will consider a selected group of artists whose work continues the interests of Tanaka, Oiticica and Kushner, and whose practices signal exciting new possibilities for sculptural wearables in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Atsuko Tanaka stands out as a pioneering figure in the field of wearable technology, and one of the first postwar artists to explore the relationship between the body, technology, and the senses. In the decades following Tanaka's performance, artists across the globe began using technology to extend the human body and expand the sensorium. Early forays into bodily extensions notably include works by Brazilian artist Lygia Clark, whose *Nostalgia of the Body* series (1964-68) appeared earlier in this study in the context of Hélio Oiticica's artistic development. Although this previous discussion framed Clark's work in terms of both artists' trajectory from purely optical art to more participatory encounters, this epilogue further considers the sensorial qualities of Clark's works. For instance, in her 1967 series *Máscaras Sensoriais* (Sensorial Masks), Clark created cloth masks intended to obscure the wearer's vision while offering different sensory experiences, such as smells from sewn-in herbal sachets or sounds from small bells (fig. 49). The works were intended to dissolve one's visual experience of

the world in order to gain a greater awareness of the body. While the works prompted participants to meditate on their individual experiences of different sensory stimuli, perhaps in a calm or meditative way, some commentators have pointed out darker dimensions in Clark's wearables, namely their visual similarities to gas masks, coverings frequently used by military police when deploying tear gas or as a means of bodily protection from nuclear radiation. As Ana María León memorably puts it, "These objects allow the user to participate in the aesthetic of terror while at the same time escape from it."<sup>349</sup> Much like Tanaka's *Electric Dress*, it remains ambiguous whether Clark's masks are intended to cause discomfort or pleasure for both the wearer and the observer.

Similar explorations of bodily perception occur in German artist Rebecca Horn's wearable *Finger Gloves* (1972), a work consisting of two black prosthetic "gloves" attached to the artist's hands with black straps (figs. 50-51). The prostheses consisted of five lightweight, fabric-wrapped wooden "fingers," each more than three feet long. These extra appendages formed part of a larger series of body-extending works by Horn, including prosthetic enlargements for the face (*Trunk*, 1967-69), the arms (*Arm Extensions*, 1968) and the head (*Head Extension*, 1972). Horn described the act of wearing and manipulating the gloves in the following terms: "I feel, touch, grasp with them, yet keep a certain distance from the objects that I touch. The lever action of the lengthened fingers intensifies the sense of touch in the hand. I feel myself touching, see myself grasping, and control the distance between myself and the objects."<sup>350</sup> The distancing effect of Horn's *Finger Gloves* became an integral part of their meaning, as they stimulated both a new, intensified sense of touch in the artist's hands while

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<sup>349</sup> Ana María León, "Lygia Clark: Between Spectator and Participant," *Thresholds* 39 (2011): 50.

<sup>350</sup> Carl Haenlein, ed. *Rebecca Horn: The Glance of Infinity* (Zürich: Scalo Verlag, 1997), 58.



removing her ability to actually touch the objects within her reach. The deliberately awkward quality of Horn's prostheses work to undermine their functionality, challenging the notion that augmented bodies are more capable or desirable than their original forms.

In contrast to Horn's rudimentary appendages, Australian performance artist Stelarc (born Stelios Arcadiou) is known for his decades-long exploration of bodily manipulation through complex technological means. For example, his 1980 project *Third Hand* involved the production of a touch-sensitive mechanical hand modelled after the artist's own right hand. Working with a team of Japanese robotic engineers, Stelarc created a wearable technological prosthesis activated by electrical signals sent from muscles in his own body. These signals enabled the hand to nimbly grasp, pinch and release objects, as well as to rotate it at the wrist. The hand also had a tactile feedback system, allowing the artist to replicate a sense of touch through a technological medium. Documentary images of Stelarc wearing the prosthesis show the artist's nude body wrapped in electrodes, wires and battery packs; his right arm and hand extended in a pose that the mechanical surrogate perfectly matches (fig. 52). Like Tanaka, Stelarc's works investigate the limits of the body, often through their interaction with and incorporation of various technologies. Although many of his works place his own body at significant risk—additional projects include multiple suspensions of his body with fish hooks and rope and, recently, a surgery that permanently attached a lab-cultivated ear to his arm—Stelarc embraces technology as a positive and integral part of the human body's evolution.<sup>351</sup>

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<sup>351</sup> The following quote from an interview with Stelarc illustrates his attitude towards technology: "Technology has always been coupled with the evolutionary development of the body. Technology is what defines being human. It's not an antagonistic alien sort of object, it's part of our human nature. It constructs our human nature. We shouldn't have a Frankensteinian fear of incorporating technology into the body, and we shouldn't consider our relationship to technology in a Faustian way - that we're somehow selling our soul because we're using these forbidden energies. My attitude is that technology is, and always has been, an appendage of the body." Stelarc, "Extended Body: Interview with Stelarc," interview by Paolo Atzori and Kirk Woolford, *CTheory* 6 (Sept. 1995): [https://web.stanford.edu/dept/HPS/stelarc/a29-extended\\_body.html](https://web.stanford.edu/dept/HPS/stelarc/a29-extended_body.html).

Through her exploration of technological wearables, Tanaka's *Electric Dress* emphasized the vulnerability of the body within the machine. A consideration of the body's fragility and precariousness also finds threads in the early work of American artist Ann Hamilton, whose diverse career has encompassed a wide number of mediums, scales, sites and artistic categories. Hamilton's first series, created during her graduate studies at Yale University, includes a group of black and white photographs entitled *body object series* (1984).<sup>352</sup> One of the works in this series, titled *suitably positioned*, involved the time-consuming process of layering thousands of spiky toothpicks on a suit to resemble armor or a porcupine-like shell (fig. 53). First photographed at the Yale School of Art and Architecture studio, it was later worn by the artist during an hour-long performance at the Franklin Furnace in New York.<sup>353</sup> Standing still in the middle of the room, Hamilton became a sculptural presence that viewers could move around and examine. Regarding this project, Hamilton stated in an interview, "I was interested in the relationship between things. Everything in my mind was about relationships made when two things join or are in some spatial or metaphoric juxtaposition."<sup>354</sup> Hamilton's body, altered with the Surrealist-like toothpick suit, necessarily enacted a new relationship between the artist and object, and also between the artist and audience. Her bodily presence offered an intimate engagement with the audience that contrasted with the prickly exterior of her costume. Like Tanaka's *Electric Dress*, Hamilton's physical positioning and spiky exterior elicited both a sense of intimacy and distancing.

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<sup>352</sup> Joan Simon, *Ann Hamilton: An Inventory of Objects* (New York: Gregory R. Miller and Company, 2006), 9.

<sup>353</sup> Simon, 9-10.

<sup>354</sup> Amei Wallach, "A Conversation with Ann Hamilton in Ohio," *American Art* 22, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 74.

Perhaps the artist who most closely aligns with Tanaka's exploration of technology and the female body through wearable forms is Japanese artist Noriko Yamaguchi. In 2003, Yamaguchi staged her first *Keitai Girl* ("cell phone" girl) performance. In a series of performances and standalone sculptures, Yamaguchi presented her high-tech bodysuits, each covered with hundreds of cell phone keypads that emit light and sound when touched. In early performances, Yamaguchi herself wore these garments, along with a pair of large headphones connected to the keypads through a series of wires. Still images show the artist in this digital second skin, posing confidently in her bodysuit and cyborg-like makeup (fig. 54). In live performances, audience members were invited to interact with the suits by calling the cell phones from their own devices and then engaging the artist in conversation. In another performance, the artist directed two *Keitai Girls* to tactilely interact with the suits by touching each other's digital keypads in front of the audience.<sup>355</sup>

As in Tanaka's *Electric Dress* performance, the artist's use of her own gendered body is a fundamental part of the work. Although her garment features cell phone parts instead of lightbulbs, Yamaguchi's technology-enveloped body is still layered with questions of female vulnerability and objectification that were raised by Tanaka's performance nearly a half century before.<sup>356</sup> For contemporary audiences, the suits' keypads trigger an automatic desire to touch, putting the artist at risk for potentially unwanted contact. The transformation of Yamaguchi into a walking cell phone also conjures literal associations of a "call girl," equating the garment's technological function with the wearer's sexual availability. Yet her works, like Tanaka's, also repel the touch of viewers, whether by instructing her performers to touch each other in front of

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<sup>355</sup> Susan Elizabeth Ryan, *Garments of Paradise: Wearable Discourse in the Digital Age* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014), 17.

<sup>356</sup> See Eric C. Shiner's discussion in "Yamaguchi Noriki is Under Our Skin," *Art Asia Pacific* 47 (Winter 2006): 95.

the audience without their involvement, or by the disturbing cyborg-like appearance Yamaguchi deliberately cultivates.

Yamaguchi's work would easily be at home in one of the many recent exhibitions devoted to the subject of tech-enhanced wearables that have emerged in the last five years, including *#techstyle* at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (2016); *Manus x Machina: Fashion in an Age of Technology* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (2016); *Coded\_Couture* at the Pratt Institute in New York (2016) and *Items: Is Fashion Modern?* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (2017).<sup>357</sup> These exhibitions included wearables whose technological uses varied from the functional to the playful, like Pauleen van Dongen's solar panel-lined dress, capable of charging a cellphone after two hours in direct sunlight, and CuteCircuit's "Twitter Dress," which displayed museum visitor's messages across the dress's micro-LED surface.

For her exploration of body-machine relationships in *Electric Dress*, Tanaka has become an important figure frequently cited in contemporary technology-driven artistic developments. The *parangolés* of Hélio Oiticica have also become exceptionally influential artworks, particularly for a younger generation of artists who have continued to explore the political role of clothing and the body in public spaces. These artists include Korean artist Lee Bul, who in the late 1980s became known for her series of provocative performances that similarly occurred in urban areas and museums. In two related performances, *Cravings* (1989) and *Sorry for Suffering – You Think I'm a Puppy on a Picnic?* (1990), the artist first crawled on the floor of the National Museum of Contemporary Art in Seoul and across fields in South Korea, and later along airports and pavements in Tokyo, all while wearing her surreal, multi-limbed costumes (figs. 55-56).

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<sup>357</sup> For more on these exhibitions and others, see Hilarie M. Sheets, "When Fashion Meets Technology, You Can Wear Your Tweets," *New York Times*, March 14, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/17/arts/design/when-fashion-meets-technology-you-can-wear-your-tweets.html>.

Constructed with cotton-filled fabric and covered with red, white and black acrylic paints, each sculpture allowed Lee's body to assume extra appendages, viscera, tentacles and orifices. In her museum staging of *Cravings*, Lee wore concealed microphones that amplified the sound of her breathing and movements, providing viewers with an additional sensory stimulus as they encountered her monstrous form.<sup>358</sup>

Born in 1964, the same year that Oiticica created his first *parangolé*, Lee grew up under comparable oppressive social and political conditions, first with South Korean President Park Chung-hee's authoritarian regime, and later with the military junta and presidency of Chun Doo-hwan, whose army forces would kill over 600 demonstrators in the Gwangju Uprising of May 1980. Lee grounds her performances in her personal experiences as a woman, frequently tackling both repressive political conditions and cultural expectations of female submissiveness with her work. In an effort to challenge the compliance expected of both women and artists in a patriarchal Confucian society, Lee inserts her highly visible and excessive form into various public spaces, provoking observers with the sights and sounds of a grotesque "female" body of her own design.

Los Angeles-based artist Lara Schnitger also challenges patriarchal culture with her large-scale public performance *Suffragette City* (2015-present). Schnitger's traveling protest piece features dozens of costumed participants, each carrying the artist's portable textile sculptures and banners (fig. 57). Since its debut in 2015, Schnitger has staged variations of *Suffragette City* in New York, Basel, Dresden, Los Angeles and Berlin, as well as at the

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<sup>358</sup> Lena Fritsch, "Lee Bul: *Untitled (Cravings White)*," *Tate*, March 2013, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/lee-untitled-cravings-white-t13992>.

Women's March in Washington, D.C. in 2018.<sup>359</sup> Schnitger's fabric sculptures reference a variety of historical feminist dress, from the conservative designs of early twentieth-century American suffragettes to the t-shirts and jeans of second-wave feminists. Her banners frequently take the form of colored quilts stitched with pithy slogans that address themes of female sexuality, gender equality and political empowerment. With their fusion of fashion history, feminism and urban spaces, Schnitger's parade-like performances offer a compelling reinterpretation of Oiticica's *parangolés* influenced by contemporary feminist and social justice issues.

While also focused on feminist issues, Bay Area artists Robin Lasser and Adrienne Pao share Oiticica's interest in habitable works with their *Dress Tent* series. Since 2005, Lasser and Pao have collaborated on more than twenty dress tents, a series of avant-garde outfits that unite fashion, architecture and nature. The artists develop each site-specific *Dress Tent* structure in response to a particular environment, from manicured gardens to museum plazas to the base of Mt. Shasta in Northern California. Like Oiticica's *parangolés*, each work is performed by someone else—typically a woman—who occupies the top most point of the dress tent structure (fig. 58). Viewers are able to enter the work, which operates as both a form of shelter and as a site for transgressing public and private spaces. The *Dress Tents* also resonate with themes in Tanaka's works, particularly for their emphasis on how women's bodies are viewed or made accessible to others.

In Donna Huanca's performances, the body becomes fully immersed in a multi-sensory

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<sup>359</sup> Most recently, the artist performed *Suffragette City* in the streets of downtown San Jose, California, in January 2019 as part of the exhibition *Other Walks, Other Lines* at the San Jose Museum of Art (November 2, 2018 – March 10, 2019). For more information, see <https://sjmusart.org/event/suffragette-city-participatory-procession-and-protest-lara-schnitger>.

environment of color and clothing. The Berlin-based, Bolivian American artist is best known for using nude models as her canvas, upon which she paints gorgeous multi-colored skin paintings. These figures perform in larger environments featuring similarly painted canvases and sculptures, as in her recent installation *Obsidian Ladder* at the Marciano Art Foundation in Los Angeles, the artist's first large-scale U.S. solo show. The installation was truly monumental, filling the 13,000 square-foot central gallery of the former Scottish Rite Masonic Temple with vibrant washes of color and ambient sounds and scents. A central island of crushed white quartz and marble sand served as the foundation for nine painted steel sculptures whose energetic blue, white and yellow hues echoed the saturated pigments of the colossal canvases displayed on the gallery's far wall (fig. 59). One day a week, female identifying models of different races and ethnicities occupied the installation by standing on the central white island, around which viewers could walk and observe. The two performers during my particular visit were each uniquely painted and wore additional coverings in the form of painted transparent vinyl. The models moved freely about, although their decisions to stand, kneel or walk were always slow and deliberate, imbuing each movement with a sense of ritualistic significance.

The ceremonial quality of Huanca's performance became heightened with other sensory stimuli in the gallery. Two room-length slanted white speakers framed the central space, emitting different sounds created or recorded by the artist. During my visit, the sounds of running water, thunder and techno blips could be heard. The noises also included the indigenous-language chanting of Huanca's grandmother as a way to celebrate the indigenous peoples of Andean culture, from whom the artist gains inspiration in her use of natural materials (raw pigments, oils, turmeric, sand and clay appear throughout her installation) and in her Andean-inspired

costumes.<sup>360</sup> In addition to sound, a pungent, undefinable smell wafted through the gallery. According to the artist, “To me it smells like a witchcraft market I like in Mexico City — burnt feathers and bleach.”<sup>361</sup> A limited-edition batch of the scent sold in the building’s bookstore confirm that the ingredients feature a mix of natural ingredients, including palo santo, vetiver, cedarwood, cade, olibanum, java and birch tar. The final ingredient, according to the packaging, is “secrets.”

For Huanca, the sights, sounds and smells of *Obsidian Ladder* create an intuitive femme space that “directly confront[s] patriarchal realities, power dynamics, and hierarchies of contemporary life.”<sup>362</sup> Considering the Marciano Art Foundation makes its current home in a former Masonic Temple, a building created by and for men, Huanca’s performance confronts both global and site-specific legacies of exclusion by intervening in this historically white male space. Much like Oiticica’s *Opinião 65* happening at the Museu de Arte Moderna in Rio de Janeiro more than a half century before, Huanca’s performance stages a quieter, but by no means less powerful, intervention in a privileged space.

The habitable garments of Lee, Schnitger, Lasser, Pao and Huanca are each informed by the artists’ political perspectives on gendered identities. Jeffrey Gibson too weaves personal and political identity issues into his fabric sculptures. Working with a variety of materials of cultural and personal significance—including sequins, beads and fringes—Gibson creates visually stunning works that challenge perceptions of Native identities. His works often

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<sup>360</sup> Catherine Womach, “With Semi-Nude Models, Donna Huanca Brings Femme Power into a Male Art World,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 28, 2019, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/la-et-cm-donna-huanca-marciano-art-foundation-20190628-story.html>.

<sup>361</sup> Jori Finkel, “Bare Skin is the Canvas for Donna Huanca,” *New York Times*, July 12, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/12/arts/design/body-art-paint-donna-huanca.html>.

<sup>362</sup> Donna Huanca, “Donna Huanca: Obsidian Ladder,” exhibition brochure (Los Angeles: Marciano Art Foundation, 2019).



borrow imagery and themes from current political issues, including the Standing Rock protests, debates around immigration, gun rights and LGBTQ protections. In one example, Gibson's recent showing at the 2019 Whitney Biennial included a brightly colored, banner-like beaded garment suspended from the ceiling of the Whitney's fifth floor. With the phrase "People Like Us" emblazoned across the front, Gibson transforms an ugly racial taunt into a rallying cry of empowerment for indigenous, black, queer and immigrant communities (fig. 60).

More recently, during his artist residency and exhibition at the New Museum in New York, titled *The Anthropophagic Effect* (February 13 – June 9, 2019), Gibson produced several wearable sculptures inspired by indigenous handcraft techniques he researched over the course of his residency, such as Southeastern river cane basket weaving and porcupine quillwork. Gibson incorporated these techniques into a series of new garments that were displayed alongside a selection of Cherokee and Choctaw clothing and objects from his family's collection, thereby positioning his own work in a broader context of Native artistic production. Following the exhibition, Gibson and other participants from Native communities and communities of color wear the garments in photographs and live performances, further activating the political messages they carry through the bodies of those who wear them (fig. 61).

The title of Gibson's show references Oswald de Andrade's 1928 influential essay *Manifesto Antropófago*, a key influence for Oiticica in his artistic practice. Andrade's call for colonized peoples to "devour" the cultural influences of their oppressors in order to incorporate and redefine them, connects to Gibson's use of multiple indigenous and "mainstream" aesthetics and techniques in his garments. In the artist's words, "I engage materials and techniques as strategies to describe a contemporary narrative that addresses the past in order to place oneself in

the present and to begin new potential trajectories for the future.”<sup>363</sup>

The work of Raúl de Nieves, a rising contemporary artist who has gained recognition in both the art and fashion worlds, is similarly informed by his experience of indigenous artistic and cultural traditions. Born in Moralia, Mexico, de Nieves traces his artistic roots to the craft traditions of his home country, where he learned to sew and crochet as a child. There he also absorbed the micro-beading practices of indigenous people, a process that he emulates in his densely layered, colorful garments. Fashioned with plastic beads, crocheted fabric, sequins and other eye-catching materials, De Nieves’ ornamental costumes appear either as free-standing sculptures or are worn by the artist and activated through music and dance performances, such as his 2016 performance *Endless Shout* at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia. Most recently, the artist exhibited his sculptures at the Cleveland Museum of Art’s Transformer Station in *Raúl de Nieves: Fina*, his first solo museum exhibition (fig. 62). One might consider fashion shoots as another form of performance activation. De Nieves’ work occasionally crisscrosses with the fashion industry — his shoe sculptures, for example, have become popular features in fashion spreads by Karl Lagerfeld and Mario Sorrenti (figs. 63-64).

Another artist who engages with fashion and wearable art is Nick Cave, whose multiple roles include being a sculptor, dancer, performance artist and current director of the graduate fashion program at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Cave has received international acclaim for his *Soundsuits*, a series of dazzling and elaborate wearable sculptures (fig. 65). To date Cave has made more than 500 pieces, each unique and typically made from cast-off materials sourced from flea markets and antique malls. Cave regularly performs in them himself,

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<sup>363</sup> Jeffrey Gibson, “Jeffrey Gibson: The Anthropophagic Effect,” New Museum of Contemporary Art, accessed August 17, 2019, <https://www.newmuseum.org/exhibitions/view/jeffrey-gibson>.

dancing either before the public or for the camera, activating their full potential as costume, musical instrument or political statement.

Although his works are visually stunning, Cave's series originate in an ugly and violent moment in American history. His first soundsuit was created in 1992 as a response to the LAPD beating of Rodney King and the ensuing riots in Los Angeles. According to the artist: "The moment I put it on and started to move, it made sound. . . . And sound at that moment was my call for protest. It was a way of being heard."<sup>364</sup> Cave's soundsuits can act as a kind of camouflage, completely masking the wearer's identity and creating a second skin that conceals race, gender and class. Yet when these works are worn by performers and activated in carefully choreographed performances, as in his recent performance *HEARD•AKRON* at the Akron Art Museum, they transform into ecstatic performances of the body (fig. 66).<sup>365</sup> This performance featured a procession of horses, each consisting of two dancers concealed under their multi-colored raffia horse costumes. The herd of horses (a play on the work's title) walked and galloped with astonishingly animal-like movements within the circle created by the audience, interacting with the viewers and, eventually, uncoupling to reveal the dancers underneath, each with their own unique soundsuit. *HEARD•AKRON*, like similar performance works by Cave, featured the talents of local musicians and dancers as a means to bring together multiple artistic practices within area communities. Fittingly, the performance ended with dancers inviting onlookers to join in the circle, expanding the work to create a participatory experience for audience and performers alike.

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<sup>364</sup> Nick Cave, "Studio Visit: Selected Gifts from Agnes Gund," Museum of Modern Art, accessed August 17, 2019, <https://www.moma.org/audio/playlist/50/763>.

<sup>365</sup> *HEARD•AKRON* took place on April 28, 2019 in conjunction with the exhibition *Nick Cave: Feat.* (February 23 – June 2, 2019) at the Akron Art Museum in Akron, Ohio.

The spirit of participation extends to Mexican artist Pia Camil's textile projects, whose recent work *Wearing-Watching* (2015) draws direct inspiration from Oiticica's *parangolés*. Staged at the New York Frieze Art Fair, Camil's project involved a series of wearable garments distributed to the fair's visitors for free (fig. 67). The artist designed 800 unique garments, each in a versatile poncho silhouette, allowing visitors to wear the work as clothing or use it later for more utilitarian purposes, such as picnic blankets, table cloths or sheets. According to one fairgoer and critic, the only condition for receiving a garment was to wear it for the entire duration of time spent at the exhibition.<sup>366</sup> Like Oiticica's *parangolés*, Camil intended the works to be activated by those who wore them and by the other fair attendees who watched. According to the artist, "Asking a visitor to wear a piece of fabric not only demands the direct participation from the viewer but exemplifies the experience of art fairs in general, where the act of looking at art is just as important as that of looking at each other and oneself."<sup>367</sup> Camil's garments echo Oiticica's proposition of creating an entire system of body, object and environment integration through his *parangolés* performances, although within the commercial context of an art fair, Camil's gratis garments unavoidably became portable status symbols for those who wore them and objects of desire for those who watched.

The gifting of garments in *Wearing-Watching* find parallels in the food-based performances of Robert Kushner, whose 1972 work *Robert Kushner and Friends Eat Their Clothes* invited audiences to share in eating his fashionable and edible garments. Like Kushner, Rirkrit Tiravanija has become well known for his interactive and gift-giving food performances.

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<sup>366</sup> Frédéric Bonnet, "Pia Camil: Consumerist Abstraction," *CURA*. 24 (Winter 2017), <https://curamagazine.com/cura-24-consumerist-abstraction-pia-camil/>.

<sup>367</sup> Pia Camil, "Phaidon's Frieze NY Interviews: Pia Camil," Phaidon, accessed August 18, 2019, <https://www.phaidon.com/agenda/art/articles/2015/april/01/phaidon-s-frieze-ny-interviews-pia-camil/>.

His 1992 work *Untitled (Free)*, performed at the 303 Gallery in New York, featured the artist cooking Thai curry, which was offered free of charge to anyone who entered (fig. 68).<sup>368</sup> As art historian Alice Yang observes, the act of giving in Tiravanija's performance offers a radically different kind of artistic experience, one where the communal exchange of food opens up the possibility for consumption with an alternative regime of value.<sup>369</sup> Tiravanija's cooking, like Kushner's fashion show, emphasizes the social experience of the participants over commodifiable forms, exemplifying what Nicolas Bourriaud has described as a recent tendency in art to eschew private symbolic spaces for social interaction.<sup>370</sup> According to Bourriaud, these artists offer new "life possibilities" that revitalize art and create more meaningful encounters for participants.<sup>371</sup> Although Bourriaud considers the 1990s as the key decade for these kinds of participatory happenings, Kushner's performance makes a compelling case for much earlier precedents.

While Tiravanija's meals connect with the shared social experience of Kushner's performances, the fusion of food with fashion can be found in the sculptural practice of Bay Area artist Charlotte Kruk. Since the 1990s, Kruk has created a prodigious number of wearable sculptures from discarded candy and food wrappers, carefully stitched together and then molded into functional, if impractical, garments. In one example, Kruk creates a head-to-toe matador ensemble, an intricately crafted and campy suit layered with porcelain M&M beads and

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<sup>368</sup> Hans Ulrich Obrist, *Rirkrit Tiravanija* (Cologne: W. Konig, 2010), 7-10. The 1992 version of this piece marked the first time food was served to visitors. Tiravanija had performed the piece as early as 1989 at the Scott Hanson Gallery, however, food was not served.

<sup>369</sup> Alice Yang, "Letting Go: The Work of Rirkrit Tiravanija," in *Why Asia? Contemporary Asian and Asian American Art*, eds. Jonathan Hay and Mimi Young (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 12.

<sup>370</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance (Paris: Le Presses du Réel, 1995), 14.

<sup>371</sup> Bourriaud, 45.

decorated with sequined epaulettes (fig. 69). With their emphasis on consumer brands and repetitive forms, Kruk's garments recall the Campbell's Soup Company's "Souper" dresses, a line of screen-printed paper dresses inspired by Andy Warhol's *Campbell's Soup Can* series from the mid-1960s (fig. 70). While Warhol's designs are incorporated into the ultimate form of fast fashion—a disposable paper dress—Kruk upcycles the discarded remnants of everyday goods, creating literal eye candy that covers the body in consumer packaging.

Other artists work with more perishable food materials to create sculptural garments, as in Canadian artist Jana Sterbak's 1987 work *Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic* (fig. 71). Often referred to as "the meat dress," *Vanitas* consisted of 60 pounds of raw flank steak stitched together into an elegantly draped garment. The title, *vanitas*, alludes to the genre of Dutch still-life painting that contains symbols that remind the viewer of death or the transience of life. Indeed, the work was supposed to go through its own life cycle of rot and decay. After falling off the hanger, it would be replaced by a new dress every five or six weeks. Sterbak later designed the garment with longevity in mind by using cured meat rather than fresh. Rather than falling apart, it would dry and shrink, like jerky. For some critics, Sterbak's dress evoked the vulnerability of the body, particularly the female body, as evidenced in Nancy Spector's claim that "the meat dress gruesomely approximates a flayed body, a being turned inside out, while alluding with the blackest of humor to that age old cliché 'beauty is only skin-deep.'"<sup>372</sup> By using animal flesh as her material and a female subject as her model, Sterbak's work evokes issues of objectification and commodification of women's bodies for some. Yet her work also explores the visceral reaction of viewers by incorporating a material with the potential to feel, smell, and taste good or bad depending on its preparation and context. The use of an organic and

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<sup>372</sup> Nancy Spector, "Flesh and Bones: Jana Sterbak," *Artforum* 30, no. 7 (March 1992): 95.

edible product like meat generates an entirely new physical and psychological relationship with the object, stimulated by one's sensory engagement with unconventional materials and their relationship to the body. Drawing upon clothing's familiar form, Sterbak creates an expanded sensory experience for viewers, who must register their encounter through the body just as much as through sight.

As with the other artists featured in this final discussion, Sterbak's wearable sculptures represent clothing not only as a viable artistic subject, but as a significant vehicle for audience engagement and sensory experience. The artists that conclude this study continue the artistic investigations of Tanaka, Oiticica and Kushner by further expanding the interpretive possibilities of clothing across bodies and spaces, and their work points towards a greater production of stimulating new forms that continue to cross sensory and sartorial categories. These artists have found creative working relationships with wearable forms that have produced some of the most exciting and important objects in museums today. Their works reimagine clothing as a radical synaesthetic form, capable of challenging the boundaries that clothing creates between the body and the world.

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