

## Article

# Who Is an Artist? Identity, Individualism, and the Neoliberalism of the Art Complex

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**Abstract:** The fantasized artist-as-origin began as the quintessential figure manifesting Enlightenment European concepts of individual autonomy and sovereign subjectivity—and thus of identity and meaning as these come to define and situate human expression as well as securing educated, middle-class, European white male hegemony in the Euro-American context. While we think of this conventional figure of the straight white male artist as old-fashioned, as having been relentlessly critiqued since the mid-twentieth century by artists, often from a feminist, queer, anti-racist, or decolonial perspective, this article asserts that the artistic author still drives much of the discourse as well as underlying the money and status attached to visual art today. Citing key works by a range of contemporary artists who have challenged these value systems—Cassils, rafa esparza, James Luna, Guillermo Gómez-Peña, and Susan Siltón—this article foregrounds the critique of whiteness and masculinity and the interrogation of capitalism and neoliberalism necessary to interrogating these structures of value attached to artistic authorship.

**Keywords:** artist; art world; art market; European Enlightenment; art history; neoliberalism; capitalism

“... as humans, *we cannot/do not preexist our cosmogonies*, our representations of our origins.”

(Wynter and McKittrick 2015, p. 36)



**Citation:** Jones, Amelia G. 2023. Who Is an Artist? Identity, Individualism, and the Neoliberalism of the Art Complex. *Arts* 12: 234. <https://doi.org/10.3390/arts12060234>

Academic Editors: Derek Conrad Murray and Stacy Schwartz

Received: 2 August 2023

Revised: 17 October 2023

Accepted: 26 October 2023

Published: 6 November 2023



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## 1. Who Is an Artist? And Why Do We Care?

In 2013, the Los Angeles-based artist Susan Siltón produced a work entitled *Who's in a Name?* This work, consisting of a performative intervention and an artist's book, was Siltón's response to a John Baldessari piece, *Your Name in Lights*, wherein, for the Sydney Festival in 2011, the art star (also LA-based) had an almost 100-foot L.E.D. screen mounted on the Australian Museum in Sydney to project the names of every person who went online and registered to have their “name in lights” for 15 seconds.<sup>1</sup> While *Your Name in Lights* is consistent in tone and critical edge with Baldessari's career-long trolling of the pretensions of the mainstream art world (he is thus not the most typical exemplar of the canonical white male artist), Siltón added another level of insight. Baldessari arguably produces a satirical paean to the conflation between the artist and the celebrity in late capitalism (the 15 seconds a name remains visible on the screen spoofs the 15 minutes of the famous comment Warhol supposedly made, “in the future everyone will be world-famous for 15 minutes”),<sup>2</sup> and Siltón's intervention was to open up the nexus of fame and artistic authorship even more deeply. Siltón compiled a list of lesser-known artists who had committed suicide and then assigned one of these names to each of the 58 mostly LA-based artists and writers she had invited to participate; these people agreed to submit that name on Baldessari's website such that it would then be displayed for a 15 second time slot. As Siltón noted, “I wanted to mine the territory primarily of the less recognized”, and yet her project also memorializes them, giving them more art-world visibility.<sup>3</sup> Siltón herself made a screenshot of each at the appointed time and these images are illustrated in Siltón's book, *Who's in a Name?* (Siltón 2013), which also includes short biographies of each of the suicided artists, of each of the

58 artists and writers who submitted the names, and (in a telescoping abyss of authorial biographical information) of the writers who contributed the biographies.

If Baldessari could still be introduced by the Sydney Festival seemingly without irony in a video clip made to promote his piece as “one of the most important living artists today. . . [and] a mega-star”, Siltón’s role in her project was low-key. Rather than build up her authority as “a mega-star”, she chooses a gentle and thoughtful intervention, but one with sharp political overtones. The heroic white male mega-star artist, whose name supersedes all the names of people choosing to enlist themselves into Baldessari’s project (an irony of which he was certainly aware, given his history as a conceptual artist in the late 1960s), is replaced by a network of names dogged by tragic endings, circulating loosely around Siltón’s author name. Siltón herself is an orchestrator rather than a self-asserting genius, a memorializer who is willing to efface herself to make visible the names of those little-known artists who died before their time. Her interruption of Baldessari’s fairly straightforward commentary on our desire to be famous, including (in his humorous, self-effacing way) his own, exposes multiple aspects of the powerful hold that the figure of the artist—still (as the presentation of Baldessari makes clear) presumptively white and male—continues to have on the popular but also art-world imaginary. The (white male) artist is still the origin of the work, the phantasmagorically projected figure who gives it value.

This fantasized artist-as-origin began as the quintessential figure manifesting Enlightenment European concepts of individual autonomy and sovereign subjectivity—and thus of identity and meaning as these come to define and situate human expression as well as securing educated, middle class, European white male hegemony in the Euro-American context. And yet, we think of this figure as old-fashioned, as having been relentlessly critiqued by artists, often from a feminist, queer, anti-racist, or decolonial perspective, since the mid-twentieth century. This art world critique parallels larger shifts in Western thought: during a period of social crisis across Europe and North America, feminist and anti-colonial theorists such as Simone de Beauvoir and Frantz Fanon and then subsequent poststructuralist theorists including Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, and Trinh T. Minh-Ha put pressure on this model of the sovereign subject aligned with the artistic author as its perfect manifestation. At the same time, political activists and artists began mobilizing their agency in radically different ways as part of a broad societal challenging of Western hegemony, patriarchal and white dominant models of subjectivity, and structures of power more generally.

And yet, as Siltón’s piece reminds us, the artistic author still motors much of the discourse, and the vast majority of the money and status, attached to the discourses and institutions of the art world, which I call collectively the “art complex”—comprised of art making, art criticism, curating, art display and marketing (galleries, museums, and auction houses), and academic art history (the academy). In this essay, I seek to challenge the hold that this particular modernist figure of the artist still has on conversations and debates about art. Foregrounding Jamaican theorist Sylvia Wynter’s revisionist anti-colonial work, this article engages but also challenges the models of authorship explored in the 1960s in essays such as Michel Foucault’s “What Is an Author?” (echoed in my title; [Foucault \[1969\] 1977](#)). I bring this interrogation of Euro-centric ideas of artistic authorship, including the tendency to assume one can know the “identity” and “intention” of the maker of a work of art, to the present by examining queer, feminist, and anti-racist practices that challenge what Foucault called the “author function.” This examination takes place within the framework of the neoliberal “global” art complex, from the work of Indigenous American artist James Luna to that of activist artists and collaborators including Mexican–American performance artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña and La Pocha Nostra, as well as rafa esparza (Chicanx and queer activist artist) and Cassils (a white Anglo-Canadian trans-identified feminist artist), the latter two of whom collaborated on a vast project critiquing the U.S. government’s immigration policy, *In Plain Sight* in 2020. Effectively, I suggest that we can learn from alternative models of artistic authorship that cut through, abandon, or otherwise challenge

the remaining power of the artist as presumptively a white male origin of a work of art with a singular and fixed value.

## 2. Challenging “Westernisms” and the Mythoi of the Artist as Origin

In my 2012 book *Seeing Differently: A History and Theory of Identity and the Visual Arts*, I explore the ways in which beliefs about and perceptions of identity haunt our relationship to art as we define it today, understood as a fundamentally European concept forged in the early modern period, not coincidentally at the same moment as the first encounters with colonized others (Jones 2012, 2021a). Art became one of the key means through which Europeans claimed their superiority to those they colonized who, in the framework of European aesthetics, could only make fetishes that could never compare in value to the transcendent qualities of European “art”.<sup>4</sup> Exposing this deep historical structure, which is usually hidden from view in Western art institutions and discourses (obviously, to keep white men in power), enables me to insist yet again that art and identity but also art and the power differentials of colonialism (with its attendant structures of industrialism and capitalism) are inextricably connected. By understanding this, we can better come to terms with the continued oppressions and exclusions of the art complex. We can also put pressure on the way in which art institutions today—commonly posing themselves as progressive and in favor of equity and inclusion—are exploiting aspects of identity politics to claim their adherence to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) standards called for by voices from within social movements such as Black Lives Matter (BLM) and #MeToo. By so doing, I suggest that we need to learn from these examples of artistic practice—collaborative, diverse, non-hierarchical—to come up with strategies to counter the often overly simplistic and cynical use of the language of DEI to mask structures of power that are still iniquitous.

The theories of three major thinkers—Frantz Fanon, a Martiniquan writer, psychoanalyst, and revolutionary activist who lived in Paris and Algeria; Okui Enwezor, a Nigerian poet and curator who was based in Germany and New York; Sylvia Wynter, a Jamaican philosopher and novelist whose teaching career was based in the United States—deeply inform this project. It is surely not a coincidence that these three all came from African and African diaspora origins and were educated in European-style institutions, as well as becoming global culture workers and travelers. They had a perspective that both encompassed European modes of knowledge and belief systems and yet were positioned to think against the grain of them, armed with other understandings and perspectives. (While Wynter is still alive, she is 95 and is no longer actively theorizing).

In his hugely influential catalog for Documenta 11, for which he was Artistic Director, Enwezor coined the term “Westernism” to describe the particular case of Euro-US-centrism in the so-called global art world. Westernism is, he argues, “that sphere of global totality that manifests itself through the political, social, economic, cultural, juridical, and spiritual integration achieved via institutions devised and maintained solely to perpetuate the influence of European and North American modes of being”, asserting itself as “the only viable idea of social, political, and cultural legitimacy from which modern subjectivities are seen to emerge” (Enwezor 2002, 46). Wynter, with similar acumen, has argued, “the West *did* change the world, *totally*”, and thus (she argues) the West’s mechanisms and structures of power (including, I am stressing here, artistic authorship, which epitomizes the Western autonomous “individual”) must be interrogated to understand how to move forward (Wynter in Wynter and McKittrick 2015, p. 18).

Many scholars have questioned the institutional structures of art museums and galleries, as well as the parallel neoliberal foundations of the twenty-first-century university (see Shaked 2022; Slaughter and Rhoades 2000). Here, focusing on the art complex, I build on Enwezor’s and Wynter’s insights and on the Westernism of the idea of the “artist” as author or origin of meaning as one of the ways in which ideas based on “European and North American modes of being”, in Enwezor’s words, continue to dominate our frameworks, including systems of value we apply to the things or practices we determine to be art. The art world is still in the thrall of an idea of originary authorship that is tied

to European modernity with its concept of the singular, agential *individual*. The artist, I would argue, is the quintessential and extreme example of this individual—and until very recently, only white men could occupy its subject position.

Western culture has long relied on the artist as a kind of ideal individual—this is clear as far back as Giorgio Vasari's 1550 *Lives of the Artist*, wherein he describes each artist as exemplary of a nascently or fully modern form of the individual, but one defined in relation to his access to divine inspiration (Michelangelo, who was Vasari's own mentor and is described as "the most divine", is considered a pinnacle, positioning Vasari as perhaps his natural heir?) (Vasari [1550] 1998, p. 108).<sup>5</sup> And it is well known that in the nineteenth century, European thinkers such as Swiss historian Jacob Burckhardt solidified an idea of the individual and individualism as having been quintessential to the formation of modern Europe (which stood in for modern civilization *tout court*). As Burckhardt famously argues in his 1860 study of the Italian Renaissance,

In the Middle Ages . . . Man was conscious of himself only as a member of a race, people, party, family, or corporation—only through some general category. In Italy this veil first melted into air; an *objective* treatment and consideration of the State and of all the things of this world became possible. The subjective side at the same time asserted itself with corresponding emphasis; man became a spiritual *individual*, recognized himself as such. . . [A]t the close of the thirteenth century Italy began to swarm with individuality (Burckhardt [1860] 1878, p. 87).<sup>6</sup>

This premium placed on individuality (whether or not it is an accurate description of early modern Europe) of course underlies and is powered by the values of Euro-American capitalism, especially that developing in the United States, with its Protestant ethic of individual hard work and accompanying mirage of individual potential supposedly untainted by race, gender/sex, or other aspects of the person's perceived and experienced identity. The belief that the individual genius is disconnected from any systems of privilege and "deserves" his success is central to this nexus of ideas both within and far beyond the art complex and to the continuing sustenance of the myth of white male superiority (the Elon Musks and Donald Trumps of the world rest their privilege on the idea that it is due entirely to their innate genius, rather than acknowledging the ways in which their class, race, and gender/sex privilege—sometimes even literal lucrative inheritances, but also the less material ways in which patriarchal and white supremacist ideologies function—secured their successes). Similarly, capitalism and its model of competition reciprocally motors ideas of originality and genius in art discourse—the privileged individual (white male) maker is marveled upon as transcending his circumstances to produce great art. He competes with other white men to prove himself the ultimate winner, the most "divine", as Vasari put it so long ago, or the most "famous" as Warhol quipped.

All of these beliefs are connected to actual material structures in the art complex as well as to the more abstract ideas of Western aesthetics; all of these, as I am briefly sketching here, have a history that is simultaneously material and discursive. Art, in the aesthetics of Immanuel Kant from the late eighteenth century, transcends use value; the judgment of art—in discourses that would include art criticism and curating—thus takes place "independent of all interest", because an "interested" judgment would entail or imply the usefulness of the thing being judged (Kant [1790] 1911, p. 65). European aesthetics, in turn, as French philosopher Jacques Derrida pointed out, developed out of Kant's ideas as a theocratic discourse of "divine teleology", an "economimesis", wherein the artwork can only be produced as a static object with inherent value by an originary "genius" who effectively acts as divinely inspired and eventually, by the twentieth century, as a substitute for the Christian god in producing art as a special realm of objects (Derrida 1981, pp. 9, 11). As Derrida asserted, art in this system was invented in the eighteenth century by Europeans to "raise [European] man up, . . . to avoid contamination from 'below,' and to mark an incontrovertible limit of anthropological domesticity" (Derrida 1981, p. 5). Hence art—often by this point designated "fine art"—must exclude the debased, instrumentalized, fetishistic stuff that, from a European ethnographic point of view, the colonized are doomed to make.

The art system structurally refuses agency to those who make useful or spiritual objects or those deemed mutable in value and, of course, to those whose cultures might be oriented around creatively *performing* rituals rather than making objects that can be valued and commodified through the “disinterested” contemplation of aesthetic judgment.

These values are solidified in the material and ideologically powerful construction of the art versus the natural history museums of the global north, which came into being in the late eighteenth century and following—not coincidentally, during the period of most intense consolidation of capitalism, colonialism, and slavery (see [Jones 2021a](#)). In this way, the art complex can be seen as a formation designed to justify the subjugation of colonized and enslaved peoples—its institutions and discourses are simply different parts of a machine orchestrated to sideline or eliminate other forms of creative expression, and their makers as subhuman. Art history traditionally reinforced this division between “art” and “artifact” or “art” and “ritual” by constructing elaborate systems of value that deracinated both the objects in question and the discourses themselves. Resting on the façade of disinterestedness, the art historian was trained to perpetuate the hoax of objectivity—which was essential to the maintenance of the institutions but also of the disciplinary logic through which these divisions were set forth. Not coincidentally, this neatly devised system also served to shore up the authority of the art historian himself. The values and energies of the art complex thus epitomize the circular reasoning and tautological value systems of Western culture as a whole, which seemed impenetrable until very recently. (As a scholar originally trained in art history in elite institutions in the 1980s, I can testify to the felt impenetrability; any deviation from the set standards, any questioning of the way the systems worked, was violently rejected, repressed, and pushed to the margins of art discourse, and the person proffering these alternatives was immediately excluded from jobs and opportunities).

By unquestioningly building on this idea of Europe as the locus for individuality to flower, and reciprocally valuing European art as exemplary of individual expression or genius, thinkers such as Burckhardt confirmed the circular logic of European imperialism and colonialism. This is a quintessential example of what Wynter, channeling Fanon, describes as “mythoi” or an origin narrative that points to the necessity of applying “sociogeny”—an attention to the realm of the social, its words, concepts, and ideas—toward an understanding of human existence as viewed through the inescapable lenses of European dominant languages and frameworks (see Wynter in [Wynter and McKittrick 2015](#)). For Fanon, trained in Freudian psychoanalysis, the concept of sociogeny allows him to critique the way in which Freud and other major Western thinkers collapse the social into the biological and individual in the social construction of race (thereby implying that racism is the problem or even the fault of individuals of color). While psychoanalysis might be essential for addressing deeper levels of psychic reaction responsible for racism and white supremacy, it must be modified by an attention to the social aspect:

Reacting against the constitutionalist tendency of the late nineteenth century, Freud insisted that the individual factor be taken into account through psychoanalysis. He substituted for a phylogenetic theory the ontogenetic perspective. It will be seen [here, in contrast,] that the black man’s alienation is not an individual question. Beside phylogeny and ontogeny stands sociogeny. In one sense. . . let us say that this is a question of a sociodiagnostic ([Fanon \[1952\] 1967](#), p. 11).

As Wynter expands on Fanon’s idea, attention to sociogeny via a “sociodiagnostic” approach forces us to recognize the “hybridity of humanness—that we are *simultaneously* storytelling *and* biological beings. . . To understand all human societal orders, you must therefore look for the sociogenic principle”; she continues to note that, once you redefine humans in this way, you begin to recognize “the central role that our discursive *formations*, aesthetic fields, and systems of knowledge must play in the performative enactment of all such genres of being hybridly human” (Wynter in [Wynter and McKittrick 2015](#), pp. 29, 31).

What Wynter’s Fanonian argument allows, most usefully, is a fully revised understanding of the role of culture in substantiating broad value systems that align with capitalism, imperialism, and colonialism. In this way, we can easily see that, far from being a frivolous



superstructure to the “real” economic systems of colonialism, slavery, and capitalism, culture (including art) in its deepest ideological, discursive, and institutional underpinnings developed as a key part of the apparatus of these oppressive and violent early modern to modern systems of belief. The art complex, as such, was a highly effective system of subordinating the creative productions and performances of the colonized and enslaved to the margins as artifacts, paralleling the relegation of the subjects who make or perform objects to the margins, in the hold of slave ships, or to the hinterlands, stripped of land, language, and resources.

Working to forward a sociodiagnostic theoretical critique attendant to sociogeny, I am arguing that the art complex exemplifies how the origin narrative of the superiority of the European subject-cum-author/artist is instantiated in (but also as a centralizing force for) the matrix of modernity, which is in turn also a European construction later extended by former colonies that follow European models of finance and government such as the United States. This construction of the mythoi of the author/artist, as understood through the hierarchized status of his “product”, the work of art, has been key to maintaining the hegemony of people who can align with this European ideal subject (white, middle class (especially educationally), mostly heteronormative, formerly male but, since the “feminizing” of art complex from the 1970s onward, currently often female). I have already pointed out that all the great “global” systems of European advancement (and oppression), including colonialism, slavery, capitalism, and industrialism, are coextensive with the development of aesthetics, including definitions of “art” and ideas about the “artist”; they are all mutually defining of one another. In looking at the question of how art and the artist are equally implicated, it is thus imperative to attend to these larger structures.

Theorists of European aesthetics, largely white men, have made this point in different ways but equally stress the complex matrix of discursive and institutional forces through which Europeans oppressed other peoples, extracted resources, and destroyed other cultures. Luc Ferry, for example, discusses how the “specter of the subject” haunts aesthetics, which is “the field par excellence in which the problems brought about by the subjectivization of the world characteristic of modern times can be observed in the chemically pure state” (Ferry [1990] 1993, p. 3). Aesthetics as a mode of thought-cum-domination was produced by and productive of a perspectival subject who was ideally situated to *colonize* even as he claimed to be spreading the Enlightenment values of freedom and equality: the European “valorization of perspective corresponds to a vision of the world dominated by the modern notion of equality, but a metaphysics of subjectivity where man occupies a point of view upon the world from which the latter appears as a material that is manipulable and controllable at will” (Ferry [1990] 1993, p. 206).

This scenario, of course, corresponds to what Martin Heidegger called the “world picture”, a projected holistic view of a world in modernity as defined by supposedly “universal” values (which are nonetheless entirely Euro-centric, as even Kant understood).<sup>7</sup> In this world picture, knowledge is “placed at the disposal of representation”, a “picture” that, if viewed from the right perspective by “man” as “the referential center of beings as such”, reveals the “truth” (Heidegger [1938] 2002, pp. 65, 67). This arrangement, in turn, produces the human as a subject: “That the world becomes picture [in the modern age] is one and the same process whereby, in the midst of beings, man becomes subject. . . The fundamental event of modernity is the conquest of the world as picture” (Heidegger [1938] 2002, pp. 69, 71). Later philosophers such as Jacques Rancière have built on Heidegger’s observation by taking a bird’s eye view of the situation (rather than a perspectival one), noting that the struggle for the freedom of the individual subject, “begins when we dismiss the opposition between looking and acting and understand that the distribution of the visible itself is part of the configuration of domination and subjection. It starts when we realize that looking is also an action that confirms or modifies that distribution and that ‘interpreting the world’ is already a means of transforming it, or reconfiguring it” (Rancière 2007, p. 277).

Rancière echoes the critiques of subjectivism and individualism as models of human experience by other French post-war theorists and poststructuralist philosophers such as

Barthes, Foucault, and Derrida. Barthes and Foucault famously hashed out the paradigm of the artistic author in their dual (and dueling) essays of the late 1960s, “What is an Author?” (Barthes [1967] 1978) and “The Author-Function” (Foucault [1969] 1977). Barthes suggested that the idea of the artist as genius is a construction (we seek the “*explanation* of a work in the man or woman who produced it”) and represents “the epitome and culmination of capitalist ideology”; he suggests that avant-garde modernist authors such as Stéphane Mallarmé push us to recognize that the author as the origin of the work is a fabrication on the part of the receiver of the work (Barthes [1967] 1978, p. 143). For Barthes, the modern writer “is born simultaneously with the text”, allowing the *reader* as an abstract “destination” as the agent who “holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted”; he famously argues that in this dynamic, the “birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author” (Barthes [1967] 1978, pp. 145, 148).

Foucault took issue with Barthes’ poetic formulation of the concept of the originary author disappearing, focusing instead on the work itself as giving rise to what he calls the “author-function”, a means by which readers “construct the rational entity we call an author”. As Foucault asserts, the question should be not “who is the real author?”, but “What matter who’s speaking?” (Foucault [1969] 1977, pp. 127, 138). (As an aside, I would stress that, from a historical vantage point, the two articles seem quite complementary—and Barthes has often been misread as “killing” off the author just as feminists and BIPOC authors rose onto the scene, while he clearly is attempting to identify an *effect* of a mode of avant-garde writing, rather than *producing* it.)

Crucial to my arguments here, however, and echoing Wynter’s ideas, is the fact that Heidegger, Barthes, Foucault, and Rancière completely failed to acknowledge *their own perspective*, and de facto the specificity and limitations of their worldview (or “world picture”).<sup>8</sup> They all articulate a model of the artistic author or subject/agent that is structurally Eurocentric, linked inextricably to ideas developing out of Cartesianism and monotheism (Christianity in this case and especially Protestantism, with its emphasis on the individual versus the collective as the site of agency) and to massive world shifts in power playing out globally through Europe’s role in the burgeoning of colonialism and capitalism, including its late twentieth-century neoliberal and late-capitalist variants. They define a world picture of which they are—as European white men—still, arguably, more or less the center.<sup>9</sup> Through these perspectively secured aesthetic models of subjectivity, this center is still linked to a limited concept of individualism open only to a chosen group and paradigmatically occupied by the white male artistic genius or his corollary, the white male philosopher/critic/art historian who, until very recently, still retained a tight grip on economic, social, and cultural power and arguably still control most of the wealth in the Western world.

Here is where the post- and decolonial ideas of Fanon and Wynter are invaluable. Interestingly, as Wynter elaborates, the West’s definition of humanness, by the nineteenth century (with the explosion of European capitalism and industrialism, built on the blood of the enslaved and colonized), consigned humans to the category of “*homo oeconomicus*”—an individual agent within the structures of capital (Wynter in Wynter and McKittrick 2015, p. 20). In making this point, Wynter suggests an alternative to individualism by drawing again on Fanon, who rearticulated humanness not in terms of the concept of sovereign individuality but as praxis or process. As Wynter stresses in pointing this out, there is one “major implication here: *humanness* is no longer a *noun*. *Being human* is a *praxis*” (Wynter in Wynter and McKittrick 2015, p. 23).<sup>10</sup> As *praxis*, living as a human could be understood as a kind of ongoing performance, a striving, a relational and ongoing engagement with self and world that honors otherness rather than marginalizing, oppressing, or attempting to destroy it. For Wynter, this clearly extends to how we identify ourselves and others:

Why not, then, the performative enactment of *all our roles*, of all our *role allocations* as, in our contemporary Western/Westernized case, in terms of, inter alia, gender, race, class/underclass, and, across them all, sexual orientation? All as *praxes*, therefore, rather than *nouns*. . . The idea that with being human *everything* is *praxis*.

For we are not purely biological beings! (Wynter in [Wynter and McKittrick 2015](#), pp. 33–34)<sup>11</sup>

I will return to the problem of the performative self whose identifications and, indeed, social being are praxis as I examine specific artistic practices later in this essay. For now, I want to look more closely at how and why attending to structures through which we identify (artworks, performances, artists, cultures, nations) is necessary in order to make any argument about how art and the artist function in and beyond Euro-American societies.

### 3. Individualism to Competitive Neoliberalism: The Artist in the Twenty-First Century

Given the massive shifts in communications, travel, and the accelerated flows of capital characterizing life in the late-twentieth and early twenty-first centuries in the Euro-American contexts and beyond, here, it is important to ask: is the art world still reliant on artistic authorship on the Eurocentric model of the individual? Or—given these shifts as well as the very recent incursion of rapidly developing AI (artificial intelligence) interfaces such as DALL-E and ChatGPT and new formulations building on the concept of “originality” in digital structures such as NFTs—is a consideration of artistic authorship now irrelevant?

To the contrary of the implication that we are beyond such concerns, I insist that these new developments make an understanding of the figure of the artist in its historical complexities and current manifestations across discourse and practice even more pressing. The art complex is still based on the Eurocentric model as outlined above. NFTs, for example, are tied to author names; the very value of the “unique” blockchain-based artwork is reliant on its connection to the author name—without it, the NFT is simply a nugget of digital code and has no value whatsoever. In this way, the NFT phenomenon exacerbates rather than mitigates the formation whereby a presumed individual is at the origin of the work of art, the value of which rests on this presumption. And AI, particularly the new variants that scoop up millions of data points from across the internet to make new images, such as DALL-E, makes us all the more aware of what it means to say something is “original”. What this will signify in the long term is unclear, but for the moment, these technologies are reinforcing our desire to be able to claim human-generated originality. At best, they might help us examine more honestly what it is we *want* out of the structures of originality and value that still subtend the art complex.

Another major development that has resurged recently is the emphasis on efforts to update institutions to reflect the complexity and diversity of surrounding communities—implicitly or explicitly insisting on an expansion of the categories and positions of artistic and curatorial authority. This emphasis has waxed and waned since the heyday of the rights movements in the 1960s and 1970s and, in 2020, exploded back into view during the COVID lockdowns when massive Black Lives Matter protests hit the streets after a series of murders of Black people by police. Here, we need to ask, however, how “diversity” is being maintained and under what premises, particularly given the structural racism inherent to the art complex I sketched above. We have moved from claims that all adjudications around what art gets exhibited and written about should be “disinterested” in the mid-twentieth century (with modernist formalist critics such as Clement Greenberg positioning themselves in a framework of aesthetic judgment simplified from Kant’s arguments) to an assertion that all such adjudications are highly charged and relate to perceptions of the artists’ race, class, and other identifications. Black, Latinx, and other ethnic studies as well as feminist and queer theory scholars, curators, and artists have been key in making this latter point in relation to the art complex.

In these cases, it is quite straightforward to point out that the pressure on institutions to diversify specifically demands that we consider identification in relation to whose work is being exhibited, who is being hired, and who is being admitted. Rather than eliminating the idea of individual authorship, these claims understandably often exacerbate the need for it (after all, eliminating the possibility of authorship just as BIPOC, women,



and queers begin to have full access to it does seem counterproductive in some ways). At their worst, these efforts can be instrumentalizing—reducing identity to a logic of tick boxes—literally, labels that one can tick off to claim the values associated with DEI practices have been achieved. This logic then often takes the place of a recognition of the structurally racist foundations of these institutions as well as of complicated and difficult conversations around who is excluded from many of these spaces. But at their messy best, DEI strategies result in institutions, exhibitions, and discourses that are more varied and diverse in all ways (not just the obvious tick-box ways common to a lot of American identity politics discourse)—this is clearly the case in the United States, the epicenter of such diversity efforts.

All this said, we are now, only a couple of years after this surge in calls for DEI work, witnessing a massive backlash, spearheaded by right-wing politicians and supposed parent activists (most of whom are revealed to be Republican party operatives) making claims that DEI work, especially in the educational context, hurts white people's feelings, making their (white) children feel guilty, or taints the supposed purity of children's minds by introducing "sexual themes" (i.e., including works by queer or feminist authors) before they are ready. In the latter case, as of June 2023, the right wing is cheerfully conflating gender/sex identification (LGBTQ-led initiatives to make children comfortable with, for example, the idea of same-sex parents and the joyfulness of drag culture) with sex and eroticism to make this point. The Republican governor of Florida, Ron DeSantis, is at the forefront of these efforts to repeal DEI efforts and demonizing all who fulfill his concept of marginalized subjects, making public statements against what he collectively terms "woke-ism" (James 2023).

The backlash is occurring even as the efforts to change institutions have barely begun, pointing to the depth of the entrenchment of these Westernisms as well as of anxieties among straight and economically advantaged white men in relation to their perceived loss of power and privilege. The mechanisms of exclusion have largely not changed since we hardly have had time to move deeper beyond the superficial DEI approaches. Even as, arguably, the values and systems put in place by Europe in the early modern period have been crumbling around us, the toxic aspects of individualism (the atomization and fragmentation of society through stressing individual rather than structural issues in particular) are arguably even more rigidly foundational to power dynamics in Euro-American societies today, with our increasingly divisive rhetoric of self/other and us/them, and the resurgence of openly racist, homophobic, transphobic, and misogynistic rhetoric and policies (cynically, DeSantis is now attacking trans rights—knowing full well that he can kill many birds with one stone by targeting a group, the members of which are often multiply disenfranchised from mainstream society and power). To this end, I would insist that it is urgently important to put pressure on the structures outlined above of modern individualism and identity in understanding the workings of the art complex—how it functions to give certain objects and, by extension, artists value while excluding or devaluing others from the systems. The institutions of the art complex—like those of the primary, secondary, and higher education institutions the far right is also and primarily attacking—are still structurally racist, homophobic, misogynistic, classist, and exclusionary, based on Eurocentric early modern structures, by which self and other were differentiated to justify the processes of colonialism and slavery.<sup>12</sup>

Within these debates, the art world simmers along—having become an overtly capitalized site where some global billionaires buy art as an investment through intermediaries, stowing it away in warehouses and never even seeing the works they buy. Artists in this picture are not always empowered, any more than, during their lifetimes, the white male geniuses of nineteenth-century French modernism were billionaires or cultural "mega-stars" as was claimed for Baldessari. In this way, the artist still functions as the epitome of privileged forms of agency but also as a smokescreen for the truly powerful. Just as in the early modern period artists relied on patrons (aristocrats, royalty, and the pope) to support their workshops and practices today artists who sell work on the marketplace

depend on gallerists and wealthy collectors (who may never see the work they purchase). These cultural brokers generally have more power and potentially more agency than the creators, at least within the matrix of the commercial art world.

The labyrinthine plot of the 2022 movie *Glass Onion* narrated a version of this paradoxical abyss of cultural power pivoting around the question of authorship and how it assigns power to the straight white male. The wealth of a sleazy white male tech billionaire, Miles Bron (Edward Norton), was obtained through nefarious means by killing his black female collaborator (Andi Brand, played by the inimitable Janelle Monae) and stealing her ideas by claiming authorship of the secret formula for an alternative fuel called Klear and is ostentatiously signaled by his ownership of a lavish mansion on a Greek island and his possession of Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* (ostensibly borrowed from the Louvre). Bron is thwarted in his evil plans by a crew of misfits led by a gay white male detective (played by former Bond actor, Daniel Craig) and a kick-ass set of Black feminist twins (Andi and Helen Brand, both played by Monae). Ending in an apocalypse of fire and explosions, the movie makes the hyperbolic and satirical point that the only way to bring down the evil straight white male anti-hero is to blow up the whole lot (including the *Mona Lisa*), and yet one imagines that it is likely that the evil white man will simply be replaced by another, who would be the only kind of person to have the resources to purchase the damaged tropical mansion or to restore the *Mona Lisa*. All of this confirms that, as Wynter puts it, "art experts are, like [scholars]. . . , normally bourgeois and therefore biocentric (and neo-Darwinly chartered) subjects" (Wynter in [Wynter and McKittrick 2015](#), p. 67). The movie's use of the *Mona Lisa* as a signifier of untrammelled wealth and authority, accrued specifically through the improper theft of authorship (from a Black woman, no less, in case the point is unclear), confirms how these circuits work.

Given the persistence of these deep structures of belief—these mythoi, as Fanon and Wynter would put it—how can we better understand how they function so as to imagine how they might be exposed, potentially even modified? Picking up on Wynter's dislocation of the fixed individual as the origin of meaning by redefining what it means to live in the world through the Fanonian idea of humanness as praxis, it becomes clear that we need different modes of making, displaying, and interpreting so as to intervene in and remake the deep structures of the art complex that have been forged from the blood of the oppressed since the beginnings of European colonization. I turn now to several examples of art and performance practice that eschew conventional art world structures of making and dissemination—individualism, artistic genius, the values of the marketplace—by embracing instead community, collaboration, and openness to audience, all of which articulate humanness as praxis and thus structurally challenge traditional ideas of artistic identity and authorship.

#### 4. Self as Praxis vs. Self as Origin

Wynter asks a crucial question: "How can we come to know/think/feel/behave and subjectively experience ourselves—doing so for the first time in our human history *consciously* now—in *quite different terms*? How do we *be*, in Fanonian terms, hybridly human?" (Wynter in [Wynter and McKittrick 2015](#), p. 45). While I have for many years written about the specificity of body and performance art as means to counter certain structures of visual arts discourses, here, by relying on Wynter's channeling of Fanon to proffer a completely different model of subjectivity (or, in her words, hybrid humanness), I present a completely different, yet complementary, way of thinking about the situation (see [Jones 1998, 2006, 2021b](#)). I based my earlier scholarship largely on the arguments of (white male) Euro-American theorists of subjectivity such as Barthes, Foucault, and Derrida, as well as phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, arguing that practices of body and performance art arising in the 1960s and following were dislocating the "centered subject" of modernism—the presumptively white male artistic genius. Wynter and Fanon, however, move us away from staying within the Eurocentric model of "subjectivity", which relies on

Hegelian ideas of self versus other (master versus slave) and ultimately, arguably, does not fully unseat the “individual” as its basis.

Performance itself structurally challenges the conventional structures for determining value in the art complex—by turning the art experience into a *process* rather than defining art as a final object. As well, by making the artist into the work, artists such as Yayoi Kusama, Yoko Ono, and James Luna position themselves—non-white and/or non-male artists—as having the agency to make art and also open the work to the viewer, whose role in determining the meaning of the work is embraced rather than disavowed. Beyond these simple but powerful structural challenges to the art complex and the artist, which open it to artists from groups conventionally excluded and redefine art beyond the commodifying and fixing structures of the modern art market, the formation of artistic performance collectives starting around 1970 radically shifted modernist ideas about the artistic author. Instead of a singular white man whose authority would be directly connected to the value of his work on the marketplace, performance collectives developing out of the feminist, Chicana, queer, and other rights movements contexts—from Asco and The Waitresses in Los Angeles to Gran Fury and the Guerrilla Girls in New York—redefined the maker as plural, collective, and hard to pin down. Developing hybrid creative practices relating to political activism, theater, pedagogy, and art, these groups further challenged the dovetailing of the construction of the artist as a singular genius with the commodity values of the marketplace in the mainstream art complex.

Tellingly, one never finds collectives comprised of a group of white men, each of whom wishes to be known as the origin of the work. By definition, performance, in general, and collective practices, the latter of which tend in fact to involve performance, are easily available to creators who do not have access to expensive studios and materials, wish to assert their presence in the art complex by alternative means, and (in the case of collectives) believe in connecting creative people through art, reciprocally also opening the work to co-generation by prospective audience members. While it can always be the case that performance can be turned back toward individualistic ends and/or commodified—witness Marina Abramović sitting in the atrium of the Museum of Modern Art for her 2010 retrospective—it offers the possibility of doing otherwise (see Jones 2011). Similarly, while the Nazis and (currently) the fascist Proud Boys have produced culture collectively, and thus collectivity is not inherently progressive, collective art projects can open new potential structures of authorship and meaning that can break down the individualism of Eurocentric models of creativity. In this sense, performance and collective practice are structurally aligned with humanness as praxis and humanness as hybrid (shared among people, co-articulated in the space of live performance as part of the social sphere).

Two examples of earlier developments will suffice before moving into my two more recent examples. In 1987, James Luna, an artist identifying as Payómkawichum and Ipai Indigenous as well as Mexican American, produced *Artifact Piece*, a performance wherein he laid himself in an open vitrine at the so-called Museum of Man in Balboa Park in San Diego, with labels connecting visible aspects of his embodiment to clichés about Indians. For example, one didactic label states: “The burns on the fore and upper arm were sustained [sic] during days of excessive drinking. Having passed out on a campground table, trying to walk, he fell into a campfire” (Briz 2023). In this way, as scholars Jane Blocker and Ana Briz have compellingly argued, Luna insists on what are apparently “individual” traits as *socially* determined by setting his own body as a signifier of the larger disenfranchisement of Native Americans as a social issue. Briz asserts, “what are today seemingly recognized as personal issues such as diabetes and alcoholism can be directly linked to the destruction of Indigenous farming systems, diets, and ways of life”; she cites Blocker’s earlier argument that, “Luna engages diabetes similarly to the way he [engages] alcoholism. . . he treats it both as an artifact of the dysfunction of Indian culture and as a metaphor for the dangers of white historiography” (Briz 2023, p. 8; Blocker 2001, p. 23). In the terms I sketched above, Luna is exposing the mythoi through which white dominant racist ideologies rely on

individualistic models of agency to fault Native Americans for their difficulties by exposing these as the result of social and political causal forces. This is sociology at work.

At the same time, Luna mobilizes the capacity of live performance to insert his living, actual body into a museum that commonly would have been the site where Native American culture went to die—i.e., the natural history museum is commonly the repository for the debased “non-art” objects made by people like Luna, whose bodies and cultures are forever consigned to a dead or dying past in its tableaux and displays. Luna insists on his living presence in a site where there has never been space for thinking, making humanness of the Indigenous person—fundamentally, as Briz points out, challenging the myth of the “Vanishing Indian” (Briz 2023, p. 1).<sup>13</sup>

Luna, who indeed died too young in 2018 at the age of 68 from the long-time damaging effects of the very traumas he narrated in *Artifact Piece*, was supported by a broad network of friends and admirers, including the performance artist, Guillermo Gómez-Peña, who was born in Mexico City just five years after Luna and has been based in California since the 1970s.<sup>14</sup> Gómez-Peña (whose website describes him as “[p]erformance artist, writer, radical pedagogue, Public Citizen & activist against all borders/ Intellectual Coyote (Nanabush). . . fighting colonialism since 1492” and elsewhere, calls himself an “intercultural poltergeist”) works across languages and cultural registers to produced solo performances but has also been instrumental in developing and performing with the international collective performance troupe, La Pocha Nostra.<sup>15</sup> Gómez-Peña has always been an infiltrator of the art complex and a purveyor of exaggeratedly hybrid forms of humanness that cast a bright revealing light back onto the white art world, exposing its sexism, homophobia, classism, and racism. Much of the time, this has taken the form of performances of overtly non-normative bodies: in the late 1970s and 1980s, he performed as a “Mexican homeless” man lying on the sidewalk (a 12 hour durational performance); as a terrorist infiltrating various Los Angeles bars and restaurants with his newly formed first performance troupe, Poyesis Genetica (in *MEXIPHOBIA*), which cleared the bars immediately; as a migrant and as a wanderer walking from Tijuana to Los Angeles; and as a “pretentious existentialist dandy” in Mexico City.<sup>16</sup>

Multiplying versions of “mexicanness” as he infiltrates U.S. and Mexican culture, Gómez-Peña, from the beginning, also multiplied sex/gender signifiers, putting the multiple and intersectional identifications of his co-performers and the audience in question. When I first saw him perform live, around 2000 at the Frida Kahlo Center in Los Angeles, for example, he was with his La Pocha Nostra troupe, formed in 1993, enacting a wide range of carnivalesque stereotypical “foreign” identities, each presented in their own isolated set-up—as a perverted living version of natural history museum tableaux. In Gómez-Peña’s case, he was dressed in a cacophony of items seemingly purchased at Tijuana souvenir shops or Los Angeles used clothing venues: feminine high heels (or moccasins in other versions), a skirt, with mustache and his luxuriant hair down, and a dog collar around his neck. At one point, as I was lingering in front of his tableau, he handed me a leash, which was attached to the collar, and proceeded to lean away from me. Suddenly his stability and well-being depended entirely on my upper arm strength. I have never experienced a more direct highlighting of the reliance of the artwork on the interpreter or viewer for its meaning and value. The performance clearly activated the hybridity and ongoingness of humanness as we exist relationally in the world. Given this relational interdependence, no singular meaning of a person or artwork or performance can be determined, other than the very broad idea I am proposing here that the work activates the maker/viewer circuits of power to point to the artist as part of the living and ongoing sociogenic system in which all humans situate ourselves.

Casting a continual and hilarious critical light on the conventional Western idea of the artist, Gómez-Peña nonetheless has built a career and a creative life around himself and his collaborators. The “identity” of each performer in the works of La Pocha Nostra is not only rendered ambiguous but also continually defined, redefined, and jokingly parlayed in relation to those who apprehend each performer. In his performances, Gómez-Peña contin-

ually shifts from English to Spanish, with Spanglish in between, from American to Mexican to transnational clothing and gestures, from human to machine: in one performance at the Tate Museum in London in 2003, I witnessed him very effectively mimic a radio interview; shifting from language to language he also impersonated the sounds of radio static and of being muted by the DJ whenever presumably controversial statements were being made. In other works from the late 1990s, he parodies the practice of Greek Australian artist Stelarc, who famously proclaimed the obsolescence of the body, by adopting a fake, clearly plastic prosthesis that echoes Stelarc's experiments with robotic body extensions.

Gómez-Peña's work echoes Luna's in that he deliberately positions himself as embodied artwork while also clearly establishing himself in art contexts as the de facto authorial framework (either singly or, in the collaborative works, with a collective such as La Pocha Nostra). His work provides the perfect means to undermine the pretensions of claims being made across art institutions for "global" coverage. In its current usage in biennials and commercial galleries with a supposedly international focus, "global" art is claimed as a happy embrace of art across borders, from around the world, failing to account for the fact, as I have outlined here, that the concept of art as we know it was constructed out of violence and is Eurocentric; it is a discursive, culturally fabricated idea that came into being out of colonialism, slavery, and Western imperialism in general. Heightening and exaggerating "difference", Gómez-Peña and La Pocha Nostra insist that we develop an awareness of these disjunctive systems.

This strategy is foregrounded in Gómez-Peña's famous 1992 performance series, made in collaboration with Cuban American artist Coco Fusco, *Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit...*, which consisted of the two artists performing as formerly "undiscovered" savages to audiences from Madrid to New York. The display of the two artists in a literal cage is, as with Luna's piece, labeled with didactic texts explaining their origin point in the made-up Pacific-Island "Guatanai". Their absurd outfits—exaggerated parodies of "exotic" garments seemingly from a mix of the Pacific Islands, Central, and South America, and mixing feminine and masculine codes—are, as noted, above, signature elements of Gómez-Peña's performance practice as a praxis of humanness. The work extended his strategy of activating spectators to make us aware of our complicity in the determination of the meaning, value, and status and, per Wynter's later idea, by exaggeratedly devaluing the bodies we engage in an "art" context, implicitly asking us to rethink the hierarchy structurally embedded into Western aesthetics, reminding us of the very *humanness* of the artists.<sup>17</sup>

If Gómez-Peña continues to remind us of the hybridity of all humans in our intersectional identifications, the artist Cassils also makes use of performance to further exaggerate the attributes of the gendered/sexed and racialized figure of the artist. Cassils's career began with their participation in the three-feminist collective called Toxic Titties in the early 2000s and has been involved recently in two major projects that move us even further away from the reification of individual authorship, either through direct interrogation and critique or via expansive collaborative projects that in effect shift attention away from the artist as a singular (white male) maker. The Toxic Titties (Cassils, then known as Heather Cassils, Clover Leary, and Julia Steinmetz, all three MFA students at California School of the Arts at the time) reveled in parodying social conventions such as heterosexual marriage. In the work *Toxic Union* (2002), produced as they were graduating from CalArts, they found legal loopholes in order to substantiate their three-way and same-sex relationship as if it were a legal marriage (gay marriage would not be legal in the United States until 2015, and polygamy is decidedly illegal to this day) (see [Steinmetz c. 2020](#)). The Toxic Titties also deliberately infiltrated the sexist and racist as well as class exploitative work of Vanessa Beecroft—two of them auditioned for and received roles in the Italian artist's 2001 *VB46* project at Gagosian Gallery in Beverly Hills, then the trio co-wrote a savage expose of the artist's problematic exploitation of those who performed in her works (see [Steinmetz et al. 2006](#)). A number of the photographs documenting the piece—which Gagosian sells as Vanessa Beecroft works—feature Cassils standing front and center.<sup>18</sup>



Two recent projects by Cassils in collaboration with others extend this anarchic, funny, and incisive approach to making art as a way of addressing deep social and political concerns by interrogating the deep structures through which inequity is perpetuated in American society. The privileges of legal selfhood, based of course on Western individualism (and yet, perversely and infamously, extended to corporations in U.S. law historically and confirmed in the 2010 Citizens United decision), parallel those still largely built into conventional ideas about artistic authorship, which are fair game for Cassils in their more recent work. In 2021, they thus worked secretly to construct an authorial persona named, with deliberate lack of subtlety, “White Male Artist”, who was engaged in an art project that was specifically billed as an homage to the Italian artist Piero Manzoni’s acerbic satire of the valuing of the artist by selling cans of his own excrement in 1961 (called, equally unsubtly, *Merda d’artista*, or “artist’s shit”). Without revealing themselves as the WMA, Cassils produced a public relations blitz around the project in June of 2021 (60 years after Manzoni’s project), marketing cans of their supposed excrement with the collective title *\$HT Coin*, each of which would be based on their shit collected after ingesting the diet of a famous previous white male artist—including Andy Warhol and Jeff Koons. Each can would then be connected to a unique nonfungible token (NFTs had just dropped into the art world with a huge splash); the website for the project claims unabashedly, “The Greatest and Most Ambitious NFT Performance of All Time” (amusing, given that NFTs had just been developed).<sup>19</sup> The cans and linked NFTs would first, starting on July 1, be released on the Shark.art website for sale (in Cassils’ words from an interview in which they remained anonymous, this private sale would be for “insider. . . cryptobros and art fanatics”), and then the remaining cans would be sold through the Phillips auction house at the end of July that same year (Cassils, cited in Damiani 2021).<sup>20</sup>

As did Siltan, Cassils picks a worthy white male artist as a touchstone. Manzoni was clearly commenting very presciently on the value given to the artist as a producer (even of shit) and was building on the earlier provocations of avant-garde artists—especially those of Marcel Duchamp. It most certainly did not cross Manzoni’s mind (nor Duchamp’s for that matter) that such a gesture related to his status, his particular identification as a white European and presumably heterosexual man. Cassils’s project, on the contrary, explicitly addresses the specific identifications connected to the lauded figure of the white male artist, whose shit is only worth something because of the white man’s larger privilege in the world and, especially, on the art market (it is well known that works by white male artists still sell for vastly more money on average than those by women of any ethnicity—and this continues to be the case with NFT art works (Damiani 2021)).<sup>21</sup> Cassils deliberately refused to reveal themselves until the project was over as a way to expose the fluctuations in value that would occur in relation to the perception of the gender of White Male Artist. The artists they chose to target in their dieting/shitting activity were all successful white male artists—Koons, Warhol, Yves Klein, Gerhard Richter, and others.

As reported in an interview with Cassils by Jesse Damiano in the business magazine, *Forbes*, in July of 2021 as the project was unfolding, the artist asserted *\$HT Coin* as a “defecography” exposing the commodification of even the “artist’s body as a consumable object” in the machinations of the mainstream art world. They note that in the existing art market, artists commonly make no money at all on the secondary market, and point out the extension of this logic to the NFT marketplace, where Crypto bros profit and other artists tend to be just as disadvantaged as in the “real world” art marketplace (Damiani 2021). They explicitly connect these machinations to the climate catastrophe—mass consumption, whether of actual or digital products (which suck up vast amounts of energy), is directly related to our “ravenous. . . greed”. They situate the project as addressing the continual churn that constitutes a capitalist-driven society, with its endless cycles of “accumulation and annihilation of wealth”. By mimicking the diets of famous white male artists, this WMA could “parasitically mutate. . . Manzoni’s critique onto the blockchain”, as a way of literalizing consumption/expulsion through their very flesh. The fact that shit is the commodity produces a level of critique that powerfully parallels Manzoni’s in the earlier work.

The WMA project directly attacked the alignment of the “white male” with the privileged position of the “artist” to expose it through parody. Cassils’ other major project from that same period during the COVID-19 pandemic (when nothing seemed real), was a massive collaborative work with rafa esparza called *In Plain Sight*, which followed the path of the Toxic Titties’ collaborative performative interventions into legal as well as art world structures of cultural value. For *In Plain Sight*, Cassils and esparza enlisted 80 additional creators, from Dread Scott, Zackary Drucker, Harry Gamboa Jr., Alok Vaid-Menon, and Susan Siltan to activist artists Emory Douglas (an artist who was Minister of Culture for the Black Panther Party from 1967 until they disbanded in the 1980s) and Patrisse Cullors (co-founder of Black Lives Matter) to generate texts to be scripted in the sky over U.S. migrant detention centers, processing centers, court houses relating to immigration cases, and former internment camps by professional sky writers, all over the weekend of 4 July 2020 (see Solomon 2020; and Cassils and Jones 2019–2020). Each text creatively invites anyone in the area who can see it to think deeply about coercive parts of the U.S. legal system oriented toward containing or deporting migrants, including the prison-like incarceration facilities where migrants were being held at the time, which became even more deadly during the height of the pandemic. Each message—from Douglas’s cheery “HEALTH IS WEALTH!”, to Gamboa’s blunt “NO ICE NO ICE NO ICE”, to Drucker’s poetic “NOSOSTROS TE VEMOS” (“we see you”), to Cullors’ compassionate “CARE NOT CAGES”—ends with the hashtag #XMAP, which guides the user of social media to an interactive map showing the facilities close to where she stands.

Today, *In Plain Sight* exists as a website with extensive documentation but also as a lingering network, a community of progressive thinkers/creators happy to work together for the greater good. The website lists each artist with a photograph documenting their particular text and a short text explaining the significance of it. It activates “artist” in a manner that is the antithesis of the structures of sovereign subjectivity interrogated by theorists such as Foucault and Wynter, and, more importantly, pinpointed as racist, sexist, homo/transphobic in the deepest assumptions these structures perpetuate. *In Plain Sight* both exposes violence and produces or confirms a multiplicitous community of creative people who see such violence as unacceptable.

If the art complex can be seen as echoing, in more passive forms, the effects of the exclusions and violence of detention centers—as I would argue would be accurate, up to a point—then *In Plain Sight* narrates a counter-community that is creative and generous, one that critically provokes (similar to, perhaps, the provocations of white male artists of the avant-garde such as Duchamp, Manzoni, and Warhol) but also produces an alternative way to imagine creative work beyond the structures of individualism and conventional artistic authorship. Simply put, in the latter regime, as interrogated by James Luna, the natural history museum and art museum conspire to produce or at least reinforce an idea of the white artist as “self”, and his products as “art”, while producing non-white bodies as “other”, their creative expression or even their actual bodies as “artifact” or “fetish”. Similarly, U.S. law, in general, produces the white, male, heterosexual, educated subject as self, and U.S. policing and immigration policy constructs the migrant, the trans person, and the formerly enslaved as “other”. As Zakiyyah Iman Jackson argues, these projections of otherness onto Black or brown bodies are based on the complex rendering of the colonized and enslaved as “plastic”, malleable, defined always on a border of human and animal to substantiate Europeans’ claims of superiority, of full humanity (Jackson 2020). Given this logic, in the history of the West, it went without saying that the colonized and enslaved must have deserved their subjection, a subjection enforced by Europeans tautologically on the basis of these subordinated peoples’ supposed debasement. This logic is fully carried through in the treatment of Black people murdered by police and of migrants coming to this country often from situations of extreme violence and oppression, not to mention those assaulted abroad when the U.S. gets involved in colonial wars. At the very least, *In Plain Sight* calls attention to the terrible treatment of migrants in the United States as they await some kind of return to humanization.

What I hope this article has compellingly shown is that, as creative forces such as Gómez-Peña and Cassils/esparza and projects such as *In Plain Sight* elaborate, something new happens if the “plastic”, malleable, othered subject performs—expressing agency in moving and living form. In Cassils and esparza’s project in particular, the deepest structures of belief that, in Wynter’s terms, substantiate a “bourgeois and therefore biocentric” and individualistic subject, are exposed as mythoi, with an opening toward understanding the “material world”, rather, as “at least in part, a *product of consciousness*” (Wynter in Wynter and McKittrick 2015, pp. 67, 71). As a product of consciousness, the world can be changed. Wynter reinforces here that we need to reconnect to the deepest structures wherein the “*co-relatedness* of stories and humans comes into view” (Wynter in Wynter and McKittrick 2015, p. 70).<sup>22</sup> *In Plain Sight* both acknowledges those rendered invisible, or malleable, to the U.S. political regime and brings together a vast and diverse network of artists to play a mutual role in this project. This is *co-relatedness* of a kind that refutes the structure of individual authorship and that points to the power of community; it also exposes the limits of patriarchal (and so inherently racist, homophobic, classist, and transphobic) logics that insist on determinable objects, meanings, and originary subjects to secure its power.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares there is no conflict of interest.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Silton’s project is explained and documented on her website: <https://www.susansilton.com/whos-in-a-name-1> (accessed on 7 June 2023). See also (Gaskins 2011).
- <sup>2</sup> Baldessari comments on this aspect of the work in “Sydney Festival TV”, no date; available on YouTube at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RaMAeIESOCU> (accessed on 2 November 2023). According to recent research, Warhol probably was not the originator of the phrase; see (Nuwer 2014).
- <sup>3</sup> Silton is quoted in the excellent article by Liz Kotz in the book made of the project, “A Name of a Name”, in Susan Silton, *Who’s in a Name?* (privately published, Silton 2013), p. 135.
- <sup>4</sup> See the work of Claire Farago and Donald Preziosi, both of whom, sometimes separately, and sometimes in jointly, authored works, have deeply theorized and historicized these post-contact structures of power and belief as attached to art and art history. For example, (Preziosi and Farago 2004).
- <sup>5</sup> As art historian Claire Farago has pointed out many times, these formulations were not invented out of thin air in the Early Modern period but are based on beliefs articulated by Aristotle and other Greek and Roman thinkers taken by Europeans to be the “origins” of European culture. See her edited volume, (Farago 1995). I am deeply indebted to Farago, who is a historian of early modern art and culture, for our ongoing conversations on these historical questions.
- <sup>6</sup> Claire Farago examines the role this Burckhardt text played in consolidating ideologies of European nation-states in the nineteenth century in her essay, (Farago 2019).
- <sup>7</sup> In Immanuel Kant’s formative articulation of aesthetics in the 1790 *Critique of Judgment*, he clearly acknowledges and exposes this European insistence on universality but also notes how necessary it is to aesthetics to be able to claim universality even when the claimer must acknowledge the *subjective* nature of perception.
- <sup>8</sup> Derrida might be considered an exception in that he thoroughly deconstructed the idea of the author as origin in works such as “Economimesis”, cited above, and (Derrida [1978] 1987).
- <sup>9</sup> One might argue that Derrida’s identification as a Jew and a *pied noir* and Barthes’ and Foucault’s as gay men puts them somewhat askew of this vantage point (certainly, of mainstream Frenchness). But, as the most compelling and nuanced of thinkers have argued, while every human has elements of privilege and aspects of disempowerment, white men who are not openly gay still have the easiest access to the *pretense* of being fixed, coherent subjects of enunciation—or of seeing. See (de Beauvoir [1949] 2011), where she critiques Hegelian-cum-Existentialist ideas of the transcendent subject as only being a fantasy possible for white men with women, Blacks, Jews, and other “others” consigned to immanence.
- <sup>10</sup> On human social being as praxis, see also (Arendt [1958] 1998). The work of Ben Nicholson is key in these arguments about Arendt’s idea of praxis; see (Nicholson 2023).
- <sup>11</sup> Citing Judith Butler’s work on “performing gender” (Butler 1990), Wynter does not point to the fact that the idea of the performative dates back to the 1950s with the work of analytic philosopher J.L. Austin (Austin 1962).
- <sup>12</sup> As Denise Ferreira da Silva argues, building specifically on Wynter’s arguments outlined here, her strategic “unsettling of Man fissures Foucault’s classical order when it unveils how the ‘first encounter’ shook the basis of medieval thinking and in the process rescued Man from the entrails of the Fallen Flesh. . . while also apprehending the world through a disavowal that

casts alternative/non-European modes of being human (the newly dysselected inhabitants of the Americas) as the Other of the secularized rational mind" (Ferreira da Silva 2015, p. 99).

- 13 This myth is encapsulated by the photographs of William Curtis from the early twentieth century (especially the 1904 photograph titled The Vanishing Race—Navajo, which literalized the romantic and oppressive idea of Native Americans as a dying race by showing Navajo on horseback walking away from the camera/viewer).
- 14 See the biographical photo album produced by Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Emma Tramposch, <https://interculturalpoltergeist.tumblr.com/page/3> (accessed on 7 June 2023).
- 15 See the Gómez-Peña website, <https://www.guillermogomezpena.com/>; and "Intercultural Poltergeist: The Living Art of Gómez-Peña & La Pocha Nostra", <https://interculturalpoltergeist.tumblr.com/> (both accessed on 2 June 2023).
- 16 See Gómez-Peña and Tramposch, <https://interculturalpoltergeist.tumblr.com/page/3> (accessed on 2 June 2023).
- 17 That this reminder was not always understood or taken up is made clear by Fusco in her article commenting on the experience of being objectified in the work, see: (Fusco 1994).
- 18 See the image on the Gagosian website, <https://gagosian.com/exhibitions/2001/vanessa-beecroft-vb46/> (accessed on 7 June 2023).
- 19 Cassils, "White Male Artist" website, <https://whitemaleartist.com/> (accessed on 1 August 2023).
- 20 See also the Phillips press release here: <https://www.phillips.com/press/release/phillips-announces-ht-coin-by-white-male-artist-a-durational-performance-piece-and-nft-series-in-partnership-with-snarkart> (accessed on 5 June 2023).
- 21 Damiani notes that Cryptoart.io, a website that "aggregates and ranks data from NFT art sales", clearly shows that "the vast majority of top-selling artists and individual artworks [sic] are by men, many of whom are white".
- 22 Wynter is gesturing towards Édouard Glissant's concept of relation with her term co-relatedness; see Glissant ([1990] 1997).

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