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## Performances of Situated Knowledge in the Ageing Female Body

### **Introduction**

Ageing is inevitable, yet it is a contested topic in visual culture. Kathleen Woodward describes how the ageing female body is both hyper-visible and invisible: mass media representations tend to regulate expectations for how women are to behave as they age while rendering them obsolete and erasing them from view through the fetishisation of youth (Woodward 2006, 163). Shifting focus from the mainstream media, where misrepresentations of ageing women flourish, artists working on the experimental edges of creative production, such as performance artists, offer alternative ways for presenting and understanding age and gender. In this paper, I examine different strategies performance artists use in engaging with the ageing female body. The artists under consideration — Rocio Boliver, Pauline Cummins and Frances Mezzetti, and Marilyn Arsem — have presented performances in recent years that reveal the relationship between gender and age in a non-traditional manner. In addition, these artists come from different parts of the world (Mexico, Ireland, and Massachusetts, United States respectively) opening an intersectional analysis of diverse cultural contexts. Rocio Boliver engages with the theatrics of spectacle in her repertoire of works, *Between Menopause and Old Age*, where she explores the futility of buying into the commodification of youth and beauty. In their performance series *Walking in the Way*, Pauline Cummins and Frances Mezzetti take on the dress, mannerisms, and gestures of men in public contexts, offering a nuanced approach to considering the gendered, ageing body. They create a gestural palimpsest that draws attention to how older women can occupy public space through the performance of its gendered inversion. In other words, through their performances of passing as men, Cummins and Mezzetti draw attention to gendered

dissimilarities in ageing, emphasising how societies treat ageing men and women differently within the context of mundane public interactions. At first glance, Marilyn Arsem's work may not appear to consider the ageing, female body. However, in her most recent series, *One Hundred Ways to Consider Time* (2015-16), Arsem takes time itself as her medium, engaging in durational actions with minimal materials that ask us to reconsider our relationship to time. Emerging from her ongoing considerations of mortality, she draws attention to the female, ageing body as the corporeal inscription of time. Despite the differences between these artists in how they approach ageing, their practices are united in that experiences of ageing are treated as performative through the creation of live works that emerge from embodied experiences. In doing so, they introduce new forms of knowledge that undermine gendered expectations and bring the hidden aspects of ageing into focus.

Performance art, as practiced by the artists investigated in this study, emerged as an accepted visual arts medium during the twentieth century. Performance is influenced by other live practices, including experimental theatre, dance, music, and rhetoric, as well as the performance turn in academic disciplines such as linguistics (Austin 1975), anthropology (Schechner 1985), sociology (Goffman 1959) and business management (McKenzie 2001). Performance as an artistic medium is difficult to succinctly define because of its variances. Performance studies scholar Diana Taylor attempts to capture the slippery essence of the term, especially in cross-cultural contexts, noting how the word connotes simultaneously “a process, a praxis, an epitome, a mode of transmission, an accomplishment, and a means of intervening in the world” (Taylor 2003, 15). With such diverse applications of “performance,” it becomes difficult to solidify what unifies performance art as a creative medium. The artists discussed in this study share some characteristics, such as the embodied presence of the artist in the work, the interplay of the body and gesture with material, and the

use of time and space in the creation of scenarios. In addition, even though the artists perform preconceived tasks, their actions are not scripted in the traditional sense, as in theatre. Rather, artists set a task that they aim to accomplish in real time. For example, in *100 Ways to Consider Time*, each day Arsem decided on an action to perform over the course of the day, such as building a clock, reading a text, or watching ice melt. Her interactions with audience members would vary depending on how these spectators engaged with her as she performed. Her actions also varied depending on her body's response to the material, space, and the passing of time. Boliver, Cummins and Mezzetti undertake similar methods in their performances. As such, these performances cannot be reduced to mimetic repetition or even representation, as the artists are *being* within the contexts of their *doing*.

In this chapter, attention is paid to performance art since these artists are not only creating works about bodies, but use their bodies in the process of artistic creation. Performance allows the body to behave as the means of sharing knowledge, functioning as “vital acts of transfer, transmitting social knowledge, memory, and a sense of identity through reiterated actions” (Taylor 2016, loc. 357). This knowledge is situated knowledge. Drawing from feminist thinkers of science, technology and intersectional cultural studies, Lynette Hunter offers a conglomerate definition of situated knowledge that treats knowledge as reliant on contexts of knowing that are not universal, but vary depending on the experiences of sentient beings and emerges from engaged practice (Hunter 2009, 151). For instance, Boliver's series of performances are a response to her experiences of menopause, engaging with social attitudes concerning ageing women. She performs about her ageing body with her ageing body. Hunter argues that artists play a key role in the communication and dissemination of situated knowledge, with art not merely being representational or reflective, but functioning as sites of knowledge production (Hunter 1999, 32). The knowledge that Boliver, Cummins,

Mezzetti, and Arsem cultivate through their performances places the female ageing body as the source of this knowledge, with each artist expressing their situated experiences, which is made explicit through the incorporation of the body as artistic medium. Hunter differentiates between two types of situated knowledge. The first involves studies of knowledge that emerge from the margins of society, which include intersectional feminism, overlooked figures in scientific history, and knowledge “from those outside accepted forms of social communication” (Hunter 2009, 151). In the context of this investigation, situated knowledge comes from the neglected positionalities of ageing women. The second definition of situated knowledge involves the “study of learning that takes place in the process of engaged observation and practice, such as craftwork in silver, or children’s acquisition of language, or more recently, computing skills” (Hunter 2009, 151). According to this definition, knowledge is transmitted through doing. As noted previously, performance art allows the artist to *be* through their act of doing — the embodied actions that comprise the works are the means through which knowledge is transmitted. For instance, while it is possible to discuss how ageing men and women are treated differently, Cummins and Mezzetti manifest these differences through their performances, using their bodies to highlight the subtleties of social engagement that escape verbal articulation. Moreover, both definitions of situated knowledge play a part in the artists and performances discussed.

### **Age Gracefully? Hell no!**

In her ongoing series, *Between Menopause and Old Age*, Rocio Boliver uses her body as the impetus for exploring the perceived violence that cultural ageism has on the maturing female body. With lurid gestures, she stages vicious spectacles where she exposes herself literally and figuratively to the audience. In several renditions of this performance, she puts on a “rejuvenation mask,” a plastic apparatus that is tied with taut fishing line to hooks in her face

(image 1). The line stretches her skin, pulling it over the bones of her skull, giving her the appearance of someone who has undergone extreme plastic surgery. During performances, she counters violent actions such as cutting and piercing her skin with the careful application of cosmetics, giving each task the due attention of a woman performing a daily beauty routine. In some performances, she appears nude before her audience, unashamedly showing her viewers ageing in the flesh. She blends humour with discomfort as she mixes various signifiers of age — patent leather red heels with frilly white socks — along with acts of violence and pleasure. In one performance presented at the Slovenian “City of Women” festival in 2012, Boliver poses like an amateur supermodel between lines of barbed wire that pierce her skin. As she purses her lips and winks suggestively at the audience, blood drips down her flesh as she hides any sensations of pain she may feel. Her aim is to “demystify the horror of old age in an ironical way, inventing [her] own deranged aesthetic and moral solutions for the ‘problem of age’” (Boliver 2014).

**[IMAGE 1: Boliver “Rejuvenation Mask” (still waiting for image)]**

Kathleen Woodward describes how plastic surgery, along with other corporeal and cosmetic practices used to appear younger, such as make up, dying hair and wearing certain clothes, functions as a masquerade. In some instances, this masquerade is a denial of the inevitable ageing process, a means of keeping old age hidden (Woodward 1991, 148–51). Boliver critiques this denial of ageing. Through her actions, Boliver exposes the limits of the masquerade, as if she is holding up a fun house mirror to the beauty industry that is fuelled by the commodification of the human body. As Jean Baudrillard notes in his critique of capitalist consumer culture, the body itself functions as a consumer object (Baudrillard 1998, 131). He is particularly critical of the demands that consumer culture makes of women, whose pursuit

of beauty through consumerism reaches the status of religious devotion: “being beautiful is no longer an effect of nature or a supplement to moral qualities. It is the basic, imperative quality of those who take the same care of their faces and figures as they do of their souls” (Baudrillard 1998, 132). As such, consumption takes on the form of worship to counter the visible effects of ageing on the body, fueling individual and collective denial of the inevitability of growing old. Boliver counters this commodified masquerade of youthfulness through the creation of her own grotesque masquerade. Watching her waving and smiling self-assuredly to the audience as blood drips down her face, mingling with her lipstick so it is unclear as to what is staining her teeth, Boliver exaggerates cosmetic acts of maintenance to the point of absurdity. She is, in the words of Mary Russo, “making a spectacle out of herself” (Russo 1995, 53).

Despite the visceral strength of her performances, there are conceptual limits to Boliver’s practice. Even though she explicitly draws from the masquerading body, twisting it into order to subvert it, her presentation of ageing emerges from conscious identification of the process. As Woodward points out, identifying age is not a clear-cut phenomenon. Rather, it is an ongoing process that exceeds our comprehension of its representations. She notes: “[S]elf-consciously and critically renouncing our culture’s conventions of the iconography of the ageing body may enlarge the arena within which we may act, but a difference between youth and age will still exist” (Woodward 1991, 156). Through the critique that Boliver builds, she engages with the binary between youth and old age that reinforces these qualities as if they are inherently dichotomous. The dialectic between the two are what makes her performances so provocative, contributing to the shocking nature of her behaviours as she refuses to “act her age.” However, her reliance on the two perpetuates the treatment of them as polar opposites. At the same time, just making a disenfranchised subject visible, which in this case

is the post-menopausal woman, does not necessarily equate power. As Peggy Phelan argues in *Unmarked*, there are limitations to treating visual representation as a political goal (Phelan 1993, 6). In particular, equating increased visibility with increased power carries the risk of standardising and reducing understandings of identity while overlooking the nuances affiliated with the “unmarked, unspoken, and unseen” (Phelan 1993, 7). Boliver’s emphasis on making the process of ageing visible through her performances violently thrusts the ageing woman into her audience’s field of vision. Not much remains unseen though, which presents the risk of perpetuating the dichotomy of youth versus age.

### **Generational Cross-Dressing**

While Boliver creates spectacles to expose the great lengths women go to counter the visible signs of ageing, Irish artists Pauline Cummins and Frances Mezzetti engage with a more nuanced approach. Since 2010, they have been creating a series of performances, *Walking in the Way*, where they pass as men in an urban environment. The process begins by visiting a city as women, drawing connections to that particular location. They then return to these spaces performing as men, which includes dressing in male attire and adopting various masculine gestures and movements. In an early version of the performance that took place in Dublin (2009), Mezzetti and Cummins slowly pace the city centre, leaning against closed storefronts smoking or casually standing in observation of the urban milieu (images 2 and 3). When Mezzetti walks down the street in her white suit jacket and black hat, she is almost strutting — letting her arms and legs move in a relaxed flow that pays no concern to how much space she occupies. At times, their actions take on a more distinctive character. At one point, Cummins starts tracing around a pillar with a piece of chalk. While this may seem odd, people in the streets overlook their actions: “The invisibility of our presence strikes us” (Cummins and Mezzetti 2016).

**[IMAGE 2: Pauline Cummins, *Walking in the Way***

**Filename: Cummins\_Walking\_in\_the\_Way]**

In later iterations, they become bolder in their actions. In Seville, Spain (2013), they carry large, discarded pieces of church furniture around the city streets. They begin their performance outside a gilder's shop, where they clean and sand their selected piece of wood — a 10 foot long, bow-like piece that appears to have formerly adorned the top of a wardrobe or confessional. They then pick up the wood, carrying it to various pre-determined stations. Their engagement is awkward and cumbersome, allowing them to spread their proprioceptive presence as they walk along, while people give way to their movements.

They have performed the series in Dublin, Belfast, Edinburgh, London, Derry, Istanbul, Madrid, Seville and Malaga, each time carrying out meticulous research when they arrive at the site to direct their actions in a manner that integrates with the various cities. As Michelle Browne notes: “They were not hiding and were therefore not in disguise, but instead they embodied men, donning men's clothes, applying facial hair, and exploring their own relationship to maleness” (Browne 2015, 249). Their intention is to occupy positions that as women they feel they cannot access. In particular, their gestures and actions focus on the difference between how men and women occupy space, with these performances relating to Hunter's second definition of situated knowledge (the practice of learning by doing). As such, through their actions, Cummins and Mezzetti attempt to engage with the tacit knowledge affiliated with masculine occupations of space, or what Hunter considers the implied knowledge tied to experience and expertise (Hunter 1999, 21–22). Their nuanced engagement of performing as men is more than mere mimetic representation, but encompasses

performative actions that transform their bodies and interactions as they move through their environment.

The aim of the artists may have emerged from their interest in gender, but what is notable about the work is how they can engage with gender difference in the ageing body. Not only do Cummins and Mezzetti appear as men, but as older men. There is no way to avoid the appearance of age; it is recognised through visual and corporeal indicators, such as the wrinkling and sagging of flesh, the greying of hair, a slowing pace and stooping posture. Age is also communicated through clothing and gestures, indicating the passing of fashions and the timing of trends. Returning to Woodward's analysis of ageing and masquerade, Cummins and Mezzetti do not attempt to mask their age through their adoption of male personas, but their gender play taps into how the appearance of age is connected to visible signs, physical postures, and proprioceptive actions. Even though indicators of age are visually presented, the identification of age is not as clear-cut as gender, and therefore it can be difficult to pin down age (Woodward 1991, 156). One reason for this is that age is relational. As Mary Russo points out, "despite the dominant fiction of chronological ageing, one that plots our lives in continually increasing numbers, it is clear that we experience age in relation to others (although this is not, of course, the only way we experience age)" (Russo 1999, 25). The initial motivations behind Cummins and Mezzetti's performances emerge from identification with their fathers (González 2013). As such, the inspiration for masculinity is cross-generational and genealogically connected — the impressions of masculinity presented by the fathers on their daughters is relative and inevitably older. Woodward describes how masquerade functions as cover up through which age speaks (Woodward 1991, 148). As Cummins and Mezzetti draw inspiration from their fathers, the version of masculinity being presented conveys qualities of age difference, even if this communication emerges

unconsciously. For instance, the style of dress, especially in Mezzetti's choice of clothing — her light jacket and grey pants offset with a blue tie and red handkerchief in the breast pocket along with a black trilby hat — convey a sense of style that also comes across as anachronistic (image 3). The formality of her attire is made more striking when contrasted with the context of the urban environment and her relaxed actions as she appears overdressed for pattering around the streets of Dublin. The results of this juxtaposition are that Mezzetti appears aged through historical misplacement.

**[IMAGE 3: Frances Mezzetti performing *Walking in the Way***

**Filename: Mezzetti\_Walking\_in\_the\_Way]**

The way ageing emerges in *Walking in the Way* correlates and connects with the presentation of gender, resulting in a study of human relations to public places that exceeds the artists' expectations. Ageing is a lived experience both from the perception of the subject and others — a quality that is made explicit through the medium of performance art where not only the artists' bodies provide materials for creative exploration, but time, space and audience presence are key parameters to the unfolding of the work. Cummins's and Mezzetti's unpronounced gestures allow them to integrate into the urban environments they occupy, which include the physical topography and its social relations. The significance of their performance is not just how they behave, but includes how others respond to them, especially those who are unaware that they are performing. Moreover, ageing is co-constitutive through intersubjective relations that include the experiences of the performers and those of observers. In her analysis of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Coming of Age*, Sara Heinämaa argues that age is experienced through the perceptions of others:

We do not experience our age 'in the for-itself mode' but encounter it in our being for others. [...] [W]e learn to differentiate between youth and old age in the faces and

bodies of others, and only later come to realise that this distinction applies to our objectified selves. We do not immediately connect the quality of age to ourselves but by mediation, via our perception of others and the other's [sic] perceptions of us. (Heinämaa 2014, 174)

Cummins and Mezzetti collapse the perception of age of their fathers onto their embodied selves, while playing with how others perceive age through the public presentation of the performance.

Drawing attention to age complicates interpretations of the performance: were Cummins and Mezzetti able to proceed as they did due to their performances as men, as they observe, or did the presentation of age create their spaces for exploration? By performing as older men, how do they draw attention to social treatments of differences in age between genders? Simone de Beauvoir describes (controversially) that ageing affects men more so than women due to the male's reliance on contributing to the community through paid labour as a means of validation. When a man ages and retires, he becomes a "mere object" as "the old man no longer does anything. He is defined by an *axis*, not by a *praxis*: a being, not a doing" (Beauvoir, Simone de 1973, 133 and 322). Both Cummins and Mezzetti emphasise how their fathers engaged in skilled, manual labour, which inspires the nature of their performance actions such as Cummins's drawing with chalk in Dublin and the transformation of the discarded piece of church furniture in Seville. However, when they perform these tasks, they do not come across as typical labourers. In part, this is due to the transformation of action through performance. For example, at one point in the Seville performance, Cummins and Mezzetti walk along a cobblestoned road at the same pace, their shoes tapping and shuffling along in rhythm, alluding to a classic tap dance move in a self-conscious harmonisation. In addition, their garments counter any presumption that they are common workers. In the Edinburgh version, they perform their tasks (stringing black ribbons along a yellow cord) in the traditional formal attire of the tartan kilt. The appearance of age helps make the seeming

absurdity of their actions plausible. What may seem odd or out-of-place becomes acceptable due to the presumed ages and genders of the performers. Moreover, the responses cultivated by Cummins and Mezzetti in *Walking in the Way* do not just emerge from their play with gender, but are interconnected with their presentation of age. Their ability to integrate with social environments cannot be attributed to gender alone, but is influenced by perceptions of age. As ageing women, Cummins and Mezzetti occupy public spaces in particular ways through their performances as older men, confirming that societies treat ageing men and women differently. Subsequently, just as Boliver's practice risks reaffirming the duality of youth versus old, the performances of Cummins and Mezzetti potentially enforce the perceived binary difference of ageing between men and women.

### **Ageing as Corporeal Traces of Time**

Boliver, Cummins and Mezzetti all engage with masquerade in their performances, highlighting the intersection of gender in relation to the ageing body. Emphasis is placed on how the ageing body appears to the audience. Marilyn Arsem takes a different approach in her practice, asking viewers to contemplate the passing of time through her corporeal, gendered presence. Through her durational performances, including her *100 Ways to Consider Time* exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, MA, Arsem explicitly engages with the passing of time. For 100 consecutive days, Arsem performed for six hours a day, with each day centering on a different task to mark the passage of time while considering its nature. Her actions and gestures are subtle — measuring the body with blue tape, blowing paper across the room, emulating rocks, attempting to crochet a mile, turning a sand timer, drawing a spiral with oil pastels, watching flowers bloom — and the decor of the gallery is minimal, focusing attention on Arsem's presence. With little happening in Arsem's

performances, her works demand concentration, highlighting minute details and subtle transformations (image 4).

**[IMAGE 4: Marilyn Arsem performing *100 Ways to Consider Time*,**

**Filename: Arsem\_100wtct Day 95 IMG\_1454]**

Arsem describes how performance allows her to “perceive the nature of time. One becomes acutely aware of the immediate loss of the moment that has just passed, of the disappearance of the work, of the fading of the memory of the work, and of the eventual vanishing of one’s self” (Arsem 2015, 9). As such, her performances resonate with *vanitas* — works of art that symbolically convey the brevity of human life. In art history, this theme of painting incorporates various symbols, including skulls, rotting fruit, bubbles, smoke, flowers, hourglasses, to convey the brevity and ephemeral nature of human life (Hans J. Van Miegroet, n.d.). The attention that Arsem draws to the subtle transformation of materials in affiliation with the passing of time welcomes her spectators to engage with similar questions as *vanitas* paintings posed as she conveys ephemerality through the delicate disturbances that suggest the fragility of human existence.

The subdued material parameters of Arsem’s performances capture the viewer’s attention and slow it down through the durational quality of the task, engaging with real time as it unfolds. In her discussion of Arsem’s practice, Natalie Loveless points out how very little seems to happen during the hours that the artist performs, making duration not only a test of endurance for the artist, but also the audience (Loveless 2013, 131). Viewers are asked to commit to presence, giving time to engage with the artist as she performs. Traces of Arsem’s actions collect in the room, providing evidence of an accumulation of the past. Adrian Heathfield posits that this type of performance constitutes durational aesthetics. Drawing from Henri

Bergson's definition of duration, Heathfield describes how "for Bergson the past lives on inside the present, and is only separated from it by thought. Thoughts, language, representations operate on time by spatialising it (sectioning, containing, and cutting it); thus time is equated with incessant and irreducible movement" (Heathfield 2012, 29). The manipulation of time in performance art through duration, become a means of breaking with the regulation of time in contemporary culture. For Bergson, duration plays a key role in the formation of the subject as consciousness is informed through the accumulation of experiences "as a snowball in snow" (Bergson 2009, 16). Duration is a means of transformation for the subject that always changes with the passing of time, a process that does not cease. Durational performance draws attention to this process that is present and informs all life, as both performer and spectators engage in a concentrated accumulation and exchange of time as a phenomenological aesthetic event. The accumulation of time is manifested in various ways through Arsem's performances. First of all, her repeated actions change the form of materials, which in turn impact how she engages with them. Second, the metamorphosis of the materials in real time alter the space of the performance, which also affects Arsem's actions. Finally, the engagement with visitors, which varies depending on how much time a person commits to the work and the degree of engagement that the visitor offers, also alters the outcome of the work. Through this process, attention is drawn to the present, but bodies, materials and space carry the accumulation of gestures that are transformed through the performance process. The work as a whole depends on this contingent relationship that uses time as its form and content.

Bergson's uninterrupted, subjective flow of time, according to Gail Weiss, enables an illusion that one is ageless, "remaining untouched by time" (Weiss 2014, 54). Even if a consciousness carries an impression of being untouched by time, this consciousness is connected to a body

that accumulates the traces of time passing. The body, as Woodward points out, is one's only constant companion throughout life (Woodward 1991, 175–76). Just as Bergson describes how the present carries the past as each moment differs from the previous one through a heterogeneous flow, duration is physically demarcated on the body through the process of ageing, leaving traces of the passing of time. Lines form around the mouth due to smiling, wrinkles emerge in the forehead from being creased in worry, flesh shifts and moves because of physical use and the ongoing influence of gravity. Even if the experience of time is subjective, the body carries its visible marks. Arsem's concentrated engagement with the passing of time is in the body of the artist, where situated knowledge is conveyed through a female body ageing in real time. While the performances of Boliver, Cummins, and Mezzetti evoke considerations of ageing and gender that are read as critiques, ageing in Arsem's work diverges by focusing on the ongoing relationship of time and the body through duration.

## **Conclusion**

Bringing together these divergent artists illustrates the complex interplay between gender, age and the body in visual culture. While these artists present situated knowledge of the experience of ageing using their bodies as artistic medium, their different approaches have different outcomes. While Boliver reveals the violent effects of anti-ageing practices promoted by consumer culture through visceral and spectacular displays, Cummins and Mezzetti subtly engage with public perceptions of gender and age through transgenerational cross-dressing. A common thread between these three artists is the use of masquerade as a means of critical engaging with social perceptions of age. In contrast, shifting away from conscious modes of identity construction, Arsem pays focused attention on the passing of

time, which accumulates traces of experience onto the body. As such, Arsem's work offers a different way of portraying the female ageing body in visual culture to that which is confined to dualities, such as young and old (as in Boliver) or male and female (as with Cummins and Mezzetti).

As a whole, these performances extend understandings of how ageing is presented in visual culture to emphasize unarticulated and overlooked presentations of the ageing. The use of performance art is key in the practice of these artists. Using their bodies as artistic medium allows for the artists to performatively constitute these presentations through the ageing process itself. These are not just visual representations of ageing, but instead images of ageing become malleable through the performances of the artists. The temporal, spatial and embodied qualities of performance art engage in the intersubjective relations that constitute social presumptions concerning ageing. As such, Boliver, Cummins and Mezzetti, and Arsem provide alternative strategies for engaging with the ageing female body that undermine mass media representations in visual culture.

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