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**DISSOCIATIVE ANONYMITY:
PERFORMATIVE PHOTOGRAPHY AND THE USE OF UNCANNY DISGUISE**

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**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
DEGREE OF THE BACHELOR OF ARTS**

**PROFESSOR RANKAITIS
PROFESSOR GONZALES-DAY**

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I. Introduction

Performing identity is made easier by the aid or use of a costume or mask, a disguise that allows for an outside character or characters to come forward. To shift into character mode means the artist can remain separated from the social implications and perceptions placed onto themselves while under this disguise. The criticism one may receive while performing under the guise of such a character is then transferred to this "other" entity, leaving the artist free from personal judgement. This is especially prevalent to the creation of my senior thesis work as I attempt to resolve or eliminate specific feelings of introversion and social anxiety through the use of fantastical costumes or "masks." By using these disguises, I find that I can more easily perform unwanted and potentially overwhelming facets of my identity. Contemporary work that most accurately reflects this idea of the shifting of identity and the power of anonymity in performance help to more accurately speak to the difficulties in the performance of identities. Placing my work within this context creates my own personal framework surrounding the performance of identity. Through the use of visual and physical anonymity, dissociation,

"disidentification," and abject forms, I can situate my work within a contemporary framework of performative modes and visual performance language.

II. Anonymity, Disidentification, and Dissociation

The terms anonymity, disidentification, and dissociation each describe different modes of performance that can be assumed by the performer or artist. The term "disidentificaiton," as used in identity theory and politic within visual art and performance, was coined by José Esteban Muñoz. Muñoz, a scholar in the field of queer theory and performance studies, used the term to describe the strategy the minority uses in order to survive in the face of the "phobic majoritarian public sphere."¹ This is a strategy enacted by groups who do not conform to the thoughts and ideas of a normative societal mindset.² While Muñoz's theory is applied specifically to queer performance, the same idea can be applied to the performance of introversion and social-anxiety in my senior project. As Muñoz states, disidentification is a "process of locating the self," a process that is occurring within

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José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), [Page 26]

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Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color*, [Page 28]

the performance of queer bodies or mentalities that function outside that of a set of normative ideals. Just as queer performers use disidentification to "locate the self," I too used this mode of performance in order to locate myself within difficult feelings. Performance is both a form of investigation and a form of representation.

The process of dissociating and disidentifying, especially in environments that prove to be unfamiliar and stress-inducing, and the works produced from these states played a large part in the inspiration of the two character series for my senior project. What led to the creation of the two costumed characters was a series created in the first half of the year entitled *Grass*. During the winter and spring of this past year, I lived and created work in a small artist town in Western Ireland. Living in an unfamiliar community of less than 200 people, far away from the comfort or stability of a major city, my time in Ireland fluctuated between feelings of isolation and dissociation. Internal feelings of isolation made me want to create physical and outward manifestations of an overwhelming personal mindset.

I created *Grass* in order to find safety and refuge from these feelings of isolation and chose to create a performative character that I knew would give me

the most anonymity and safety in this unfamiliar landscape. While playing this character, I could transfer my own feelings of loneliness. The Grass character was in many ways illustrated my physical displays of anxiety, but in many other ways was a separate entity entirely. The character made it okay to perform certain displays of loneliness and solitude in my own identity: crying, observing quietly, being ignored, reflecting, etc. It also made it acceptable to perform the uncanny parts of my identity which I would not be comfortable displaying in many situations; it allowed for the uncanny parts of myself to be illustrated without being wholly tied down by one manifestation of my identity.



Image #1 from *Grass* series, Grace Poole, 2015

Contemporary artist Nick Cave made his most notable work, the *Soundsuits*, in a response to feelings that required a refuge state. Cave made his first *Soundsuit* in 1992, following an emotional reaction to the beating of the Los Angeles taxi driver, Rodney King. While researching accounts of the attack, Cave found that King was described by the officers who attacked him as "huge, menacing, almost superhuman," an intimidating "other" buffed out in front of white officers of the law.³ Reflecting on the weight and severity of the event in a public park, Cave became fixated on a small twig on the ground. He began gathering hundreds of thousands of twigs and branches until he had enough to assemble what was to be his first *Soundsuit*. What he created with this first suit was something of a "thick, stiff, porcupine-like covering," a dramatic helmet with large branches protruding out the top. He describes this work as a large costume that was equal parts "armor and

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Ann Landi, "Dressing for Excess," ARTnews, June 2012, [Page 66]

veil.”⁴ In the process, Cave unintentionally made a movable sculpture evoking this specific act of trauma and fear. Therefore it could additionally act as a visual representation of the role of protest. He took this as inspiration to create a much larger body of sculptural works. He wanted to make these strange creatures who cannot be ignored and illustrate protest through the movement of their “bodies.” Cave believes his work evokes equal parts silence and sound, but “in order to be heard, you’ve got to speak louder...the body is an alarm system that could go off any second.”⁵ He made work which functioned as armor, a place that could shield its performer underneath, giving them to safety to protest and perform.

The most important role of Nick Cave’s work as inspiration for my final pieces is the way in which it provides complete anonymity for those who wear the suit. It makes no difference whether the performer is Nick Cave himself or a hired

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Amy Karafin, "An Ecstatic Embrace: Inside the Soundsuits of Nick Cave," *Art and Australia* 48, no. 4 (2011): [Page: 689]

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Richard Lacayo, "The Noisemaker," *Time*, March 27, 2012

professional dancer, the audience is unable to determine who is underneath. This complete and impenetrable anonymity allows Cave's audience to project their own identity onto the object and in turn the suit itself transforms into something entirely new. Cave designed the suits to be completely transformative, wanting any who wear it to experience this renewing shift in identity. The *Soundsuits* provide the environment in which this shift can take place. The wearer can channel feelings and movements outside themselves to create an identity that is wholly themselves and an "other." He explains the power of the anonymity of the suits comes about when one decides to what degree to open up themselves to the new identity of the suit.⁶ Cave claims that the suits allow for identities to be lost, hidden, and claimed anew. They act "obscure and liberate." the performer.⁷ When wearing the suit, one feels free to act out their own identity or others without fear. It is a liberating experience,

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Karen Searle, "Nick Cave: Disguise and Camouflage," *Ornament* 17, no. 3 (1994): [Page 45].

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Karafin, "An Ecstatic Embrace: Inside," [Page 689].

because it truly erases gender, race, and class of the individual and requires the viewer to look at something without preconceived judgment.⁸ As Cave has explained when he puts on the suit the viewer cannot tell whether he was "a woman or man, if [he] was red, green, or orange...[he] was no longer Nick. [He] was a shaman of sorts."⁹ This idea of the all encompassing anonymity and the transformative identity is the most intriguing part of Nick Cave's work. Just when the viewer believes they know exactly what they're looking at, the figure starts to move, make noise, and all at once they are faced with another creature all together.

I find this same transformation of anonymity and identities are at play in the work created for my senior thesis. Anonymity is crucial for the audience to be able to project their own emotions and feelings about identity onto the work. While the

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"Art Talk: An Interview with Nick Cave at the Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston," video file, 13:17, Youtube, posted by Institute of Contemporary Art Boston, May 21, 2015, accessed October 26, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ndvI8L_a72A.

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Jori Finkel, "I Dream the Clothing Electric," New York Times (New York, NY), March 31, 2009, Art & Design

series of photographs was created under my own identity framework, what life experience the viewer brings to the piece will ultimately transform it to fit their personal framework. The anonymity allows for these multifaceted meanings to take shape in the work, by not holding it to any one concrete narrative.



Soundsuit, Nick Cave, 2015

III. The Performative Power of Disguise and Gillian Wearing's Masks

Hiding one's own features, through the use of masks, has "less to do with trying out a different identity than...to [create] a certain distance between sitter and viewer."¹⁰ Gillian Wearing uses this idea in both her photographic self-portrait series, *Album*—in which she wears life-like masks of herself in the past as well as other family members— and her video and photographic piece entitled *Homage to the woman with the bandaged face who I saw yesterday down Walworth Road*. It is a near constant motif in Wearing's work to use masks as a way of protection in order to perform at a distance and also to illustrate or confess potentially abject narratives. In *Homage to the woman with the bandaged face who I saw yesterday down Walworth Road*, Wearing uses the simplified mask of medical bandages as a way to perform an identity that is not her own, but that she, in some perverse way, envies

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Doris Krystof, "Call Gillian: Masks, Identity, and Performativity," in Gillian Wearing, comp. Whitechapel Gallery (London, England: Whitechapel Gallery, 2012), [Page 11].

and wishes to imitate. The mask, a series of layered bandages with three rectangular slits for the eyes and mouth, allows Wearing to experience the “tormented...adverse reactions” the woman she was paying a “homage” to must have received.¹¹ This piece in some way plays into the idea of the performance of identity as a perverse “charade” that is nearly always controlled by the artist, allowing them complete authority over the narrative they are presenting. While the *Homage* piece is comprised of uncomfortable video, Wearing’s *Album* series as well as other masked self-portraits, allows for a still drama within performative images. It is clear there is a performance at play within the masks, although it does not explicitly illustrate a physical performance like many of her other video pieces. Within these images, she explores the possibilities of “theatrical modes of representation,” allowing characters that are facets of herself and amalgamations of many other persons to come forward.¹² I also admire Wearing’s use of the photo studio environment in these

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Whitechapel Gallery, ed., Gillian Wearing (London, England: Whitechapel Gallery, 2012), [Page 70]

¹²

particular portraits. She uses unembellished setting of the photo studio—in the same way I attempt to use it in my work—in order to create a dramatic environment for an open-ended performance. The blank setting of the photo studio allows for a multitude of narratives to be brought forward, narratives about herself and her family. I use the photo studio in a similar way, to keep the narrative of the pieces open ended, so that audience members can bring forward their own experiences into the work.



Still from *Homage to the Woman With the Bandaged Face Who I Saw Yesterday Down Walworth Road*, Gillian Wearing, 1995

Krystof, "Call Gillian: Masks, Identity," in Gillian Wearing, [Page 18].



Self Portrait as My Mother Jean Gregory, Gillian Wearing, 2003



Self Portrait at Three Years Old, Gillian Wearing, 2004

IV. Abject Performance and Processes

Abject art is work which explores or delves into themes that “both transgress and threaten our sense of cleanliness.” Abject work is also which can reference bodily functions and/or inside processes of the body. References to both these ideas are enacted in Figure 1 and 2. which make reference to abject organs such as the intestines. The intestines and the form they take are both abject processes of digestion and eventually defecation. Ernesto Neto uses similar forms to insinuate these processes as well as referencing to the uterus and womb. These concepts are clear in Neto’s 1998 piece *Navedenga* as well as his *Ovaloids*. The term “Navedenga” was created by Neto to explain his sculptural work—“nave-” meaning ship or capsule and “-denga” meaning female sexuality and fertility. Bulbous, disgusting, yet beautiful, *Navedenga* and *Ovaloids* subtly references the abject female body and its processes.¹³ The *Ovaloids* especially function within this idea of internal processes,

having the viewer "reach in and penetrate the forms."¹⁴ The intestines character I created also references the display of internal processes and the form they take while not explicitly illustrating them. This produces feelings of abjection through a comical lens rather than graphically. The character almost bounces around displaying its abjection. Much like Neto's amorphous figures, they reference the body and human interaction while also shying away from it.



ERNESTO NETO NAVEDENGA AND THE OVALOIDS,"

http://www.tanyabonakdargallery.com/exhibitions/ernesto-neto_5

"ERNESTO NETO NAVEDENGA AND THE OVALOIDS."

Navedenga, Ernesto Neto, 1998

The use of the abject came about in my work as a way of performing identity in a removed way. Abjection and the forms it takes are integral parts of the human experience and therefore, allow for different manifestations of identity to be illustrated. I was, in part, inspired by the ways in which Paul McCarthy uses mass-produced food products and comical if not perverse disguises in his performances to confront the viewer with bodily fluids and to disgust his audience in a way that provokes a dialogue. In "the Painter (1995)," McCarthy uses food-products, such as ketchup and mustard, as well as paint as a tool to aid in his performative actions and to discuss the role of the artist in the consumer-driven art world. Food for McCarthy is used to both draw in and repel the viewer. The abject use of food in his work makes his audience disgusted, yet unable to look away. In this way, McCarthy builds an interested audience, one that stays to discover his more pertinent information. He explains his frustrations with art ("I can't do this anymore") and the

art world ("you can't do it anymore, you can't do it anymore").¹⁵ In a similar way, I used abject forms, the intestines character, in order to express my frustrations and anxieties about performing through states of introversion. By using this technique of abject forms within narrative work unrelated to analysis about abjection, I can draw the attention of the audience long enough to have a conversation about identity.



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Bruce Hainley, "Paul McCarthy," *Frieze*, no. 58 (April 2001)

Still from *The Painter*, by Paul McCarthy, 1995

V. Conclusion

Taking all of these terms, processes, inspirations, and approaches into account, the *Fur* and *Intestines* character are explorations of identity in photographic form. In addition to being studies of identity, the project also functions as an artistic outlet and performance of introversion, social anxiety, isolation, etc. Each individual character functions under these different frameworks, some taking on many of these facets while others function under only one. The use of these costumed characters facilitates a more naturalistic performance of identity. It allows the artist to highlight localized perceptions of self. By using these costumes, the artist is unencumbered by other facets of their identity and therefore can focus solely on particular feelings or sensitivities for aid in a more focused performance.

Over the past six months, I have created two separate characters to aid in this performance of identity. Each individual character works under the same broad framework of the performance of identity. However, each delves more specifically into different facets and their subsequent actions. The *Grass* character which I

discussed previously in conjugation with previous work and character performance, functions under the stress of performing in an unfamiliar environment. This unfamiliarity bred intense feelings of isolation and loneliness, requiring me to find ways in which I could gain refuge and comfort. Within the *Grass* costume, I could perform these feelings through a fantastical creature. Because I was not entirely myself, this gave me an outlet in order to process feelings of isolation and loneliness. Therefore, I could successfully transfer these overwhelming feelings onto this outsider, this character, for them to perform in place of myself. This first character allowed for me to create a framework on which I continued to construct my two subsequent characters. I wanted to delve deeper into the ways in which the self can be transferred to different characters so I used this set of facets in order to create other additional characters. Following the *Grass* character, I created both the *Intestines* and *Fur* characters (Figure 1, Figure 2) produced during the fall semester of my senior thesis project. The *Intestines* character was created in response to the use of abjection as a way to perform the self. Much like Wearing or McCarthy, who use references to abject bodily organs, functions, and narratives in their performative

work to suggest feelings of outsidersness, I wanted the *Intestines* character to work under a set of ideas similar to their work. The last character, made of fur and burlap, is a direct response to the idea of anonymity in play with Nick Cave's *Soundsuits*.

What differs in my piece is that there lies a more direct reference to personhood.

Elements of personhood (arms, hands, legs) are always included in the final form of my images in some fashion. Cave choses to eliminate the person from the final form all-together, but I believe direct visual clues of personhood give grounding and context to the form. When the viewer can see an arm, a hand, a foot, the person underneath can have a conversation with its audience, an identity concealed yet revealed.

Appendix

Figure 1.



Grace Poole, *Fur* (#1). 2015. Ink jet print, 25"x25"

Figure 2.



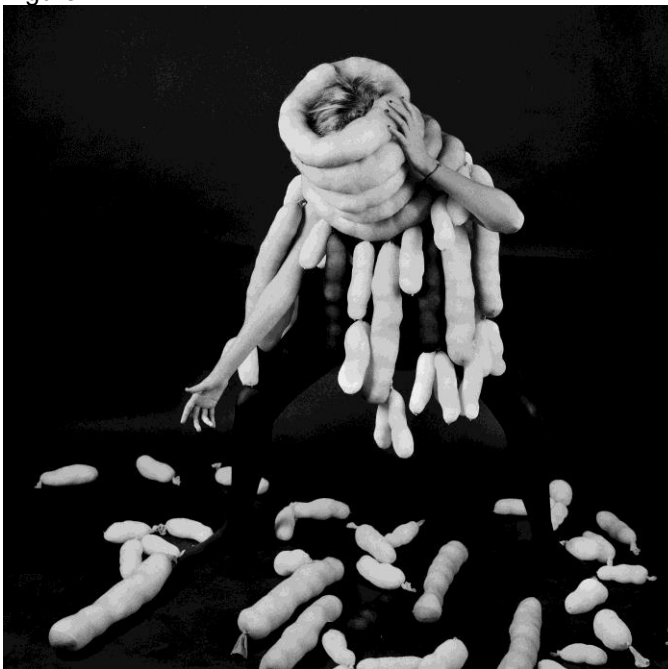
Grace Poole, *Intestines* (#1). 2015. Ink jet print, 25"x25"

Figure 3.



Grace Poole, *Fur* (#2). 2015. Ink jet print, 18"x18"

Figure 4.



Grace Poole, *Intestines* (#2). 2015. Ink jet print, 18"x18"

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