



In *Borderline*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jj5n7jL2ptQ>



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Strange Bodies: Art and Identity

To consider our skin as our first border is to see the body as a geographic site that we signify through our experiences in the world across time. Over the last few years, given our mass-use of social media and our selfie culture, the body has emerged as the ultimate tool for the manifestation of identity. But the body has served as an expression of identity for more than a century. At Cabaret Voltaire in Zürich, performance art emerged alongside the anti-art Dada movement that sought to deride the rigidity of artistic and cultural structures. The body became to the visual arts what the pen is to literature. Today, performance art interacts with our social reality directly, with artists not only expressing themselves through their personhood but *from* it.

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**Photos courtesy of the artist.

Body and Identity

Beyond constituting the spaces that we inhabit, our bodies allow us to feel and to find our places in the world. We might consider the body a palimpsest of all that we have experienced, of all the feelings that contain and represent who we are. The theory of performativity proposed by Judith Butler suggests that every sociocultural context and our response to it define the relationship between body, identity, and gender. The environment that surrounds us, as determined by various factors, fluctuates across the phases of our lives, pushing us to forge an identity that can adapt to a given space in time.

Going back to the skin, we may note that it is permeable and absorbent. As the first barrier between ourselves and our surroundings, the experiences we live permeate our skin, and we carry them with us throughout our lifetimes, like invisible scars. These experiences usually detonate changes in our thoughts and feelings. The latter, in turn, constitute processes that unfold within the body, causing it to be malleable as an entity that is constantly (re)created in the flux of space and time.

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Foreign Bodies, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kGVXC7sukqk>



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Performance Art

Though practices using the body as an artistic instrument began with the Futurism of 1910, as mentioned above, in Cabaret Voltaire, performance art was born in parallel to the Dada. Performance art rooted en vez de based on the body emerged based on planned or improvised actions in public spaces, with live audiences. These pieces were sometimes recorded on video and showed later on. As of 1970, the terms performance and performance art became widely used thanks to the pioneering works of Joan Jonas and Vito Acconci. From its origins, this practice has sought to subvert artistic and sociocultural structures, on top of interacting with social reality. Today, performance art is understood as an approach to bodily identity politics. Performance allows us to approach political, social, and personal topics from a perspective that lies beyond dominant cultural structures. Furthermore, it is ephemeral and immediate in nature. Although video registries of performances may keep pieces alive in posterity exist, the recorded actions necessarily unfold in a singular space and time. Performance art's “impermanent” character provides performance artists with a creative alternative, which — just as the body is transitory thanks to lived experience — is always in movement and acquiring new meanings.

María Adela Díaz

I had the opportunity of working with visual and graphic artist María Adela Díaz, who was born and raised in Guatemala. Her career begun in the late '90s, when art produced by women was not welcome in galleries, forcing women to present their performances on the streets. In a way, such public spaces served to challenge the government and spaces of power such as Guatemala's Cathedral and the Presidential House.

María is part of a post-war generation that experienced ample violence, and her art has become a way for her to express her non-conformity with the patriarchal political



La Carga, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=epScryNHkFk>

system. At age 25, she decided to migrate to the United States, seeking new opportunities as an artist and as a mother. Consequently, she began to work with the topic of migration as soon as she arrived in Los Angeles. Not only did she find herself affected by her own experiences, but also by the stories of others.

Many of her performances in Los Angeles city speak of solitude and emptiness, which she felt more poignantly upon leaving Guatemala. In her performance *La Carga* (California, 2003)¹, she held her naked daughter in her arms for three hours under the sun, carrying her through rough paths and hills. The piece speaks to single mothers who have crossed the border with their children in search of a better life. In the video performance, María constantly repositions her daughter in her arms until her body caves in, forcing her to lay her on the hot soil en vez de earth for a moment. The performance reminds us of the physical and emotional weight carried by the bodies of migrant mothers.

An artistic expression as flexible as performance allows for the exploration of social issues by using objects as artistic tools. In *Borderline* (2005), María Adela works with a metaphor by locking herself up inside a wooden box and navigating

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the ocean for 45 minutes, protesting the US migratory laws dehumanizing migrants. She portrays an agonizing, suffocating, and ever-anxious feeling that many people, including herself, have experienced. The box drifts to the beat of the sea as María documents it with her camera from the inside the cramped space, a reminder that the body is the first to be affected by travel.

In *Foreign Bodies* (2020), she again uses the public space to speak of invisible bodies that people ignore, even when passing right above them. The artist showcases a brown body splayed at the shore, ignored and covered in seaweed — a similar image to that of bodies found at the border. The invisibility of migrant, feminine bodies pushes them to be perceived as objects rather than as living beings. María is aware that, as a woman, she stands at a disadvantage: 1 in 3 women who cross the border suffer from sexual violence, pushing her to consider the gender perspective in her work. *Foreign Bodies* reflects upon those bodies that shouldn't have to be viewed as strange, as they all belong to the same territory — the Earth — but are exoticized nonetheless. Just as our experiences permeate the skin of our bodies, our bodies permeate borders.

When I asked María about the significance of placing her body in her art after everything her body has experienced, she cited that “trauma is an evocative and emotive force that binds an audience to the theatrical action drawing them ever deeper into the performance event.” Within her is a latent, poetic need to use her own body as a canvas. In María's words, “There is memory in our bodies. We carry a lot of weight from life and there is history behind each one of us, the memories, emotions, and injustices follow us everywhere we go.” ■■■