

Witness: Notes from the Artist

By Allison Wyper

Abstract

Witness is a participatory performance for one audience member at a time in which the viewer is configured as accomplice to the performance event, a ritual in which power is borrowed, trafficked, and stolen. Within this intimate encounter we are challenged to acknowledge our participation in acts of violence and exploitation, and to confront our responsibility for the other. Witnesses are asked to act, to sign their names, testifying that they have willingly taken part. The question then lingers: in what exactly have they taken part? This essay is part artistic statement and part performance documentation and analysis of a project which was made in dialogue with over one hundred and fifty individual participant Witnesses in five different venues between 2010 and 2011.

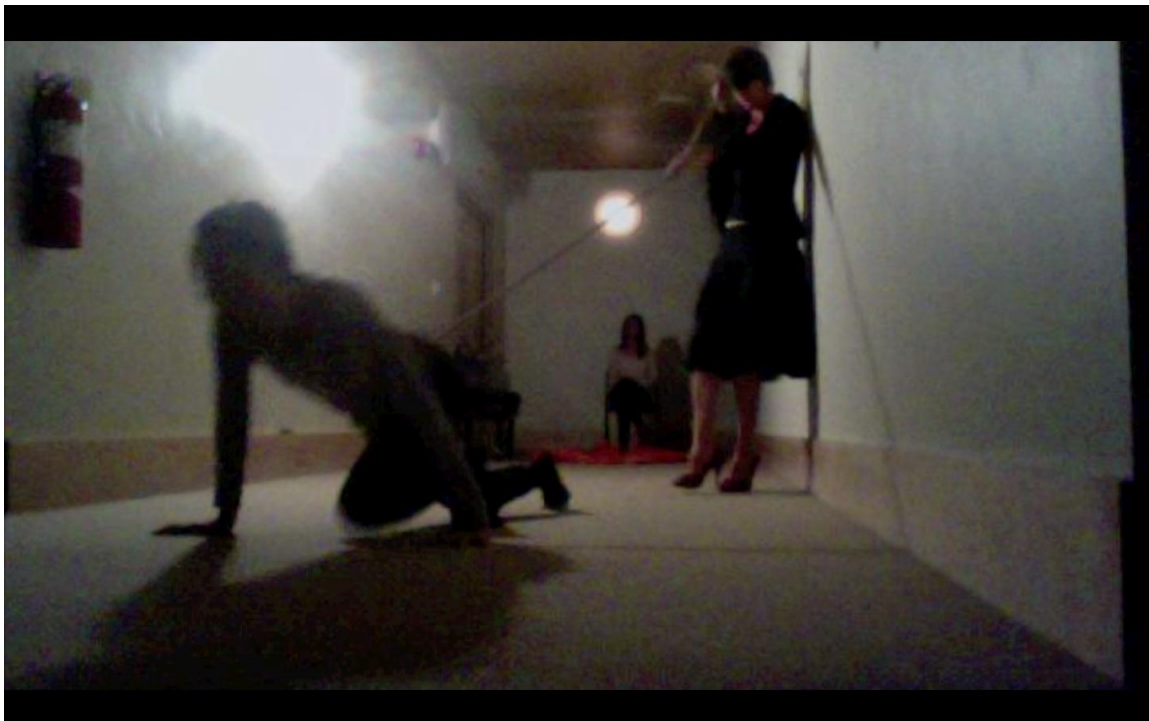


Fig. 1: *Witness*, UCLA (2011). Courtesy of Allison Wyper.

Witness is a performance for one audience member at a time in which the viewer is configured as accomplice to a ritual in which the tenuous mantle (or blindfold) of power is borrowed, trafficked, and stolen. The single viewers enter a small room resembling a torture chamber where they are asked to participate in a performance at times beautiful, erotic, and violent, a ritual they cannot understand, with implications that reach beyond the immediate moment. Within this intimate encounter we (performer, choreographer, and witness) are challenged to acknowledge our participation in acts of violence and exploitation, and to confront our responsibility for the other. As we separate, a trace of the other lingers.

Acknowledging My Complicity

Witness is about the viewer making a choice, taking action, and deciding what position to take in relation to violence/atrocities/torture/war/exploitation being performed in his/her name. I made this piece as part of a series of works (the solo performance *My Husband, My Country*¹ preceded it in 2007, see Fig. 2) that deal with my feelings in response to the infamous Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo photos and the situations they bring to light, in which I am directly implicated as an American, both as torturer and oppressed. As a dissenting American, as a vocal anti-Bush American, and as an activist, I felt betrayed, manipulated and misrepresented by my country. At the same time, I am not being tortured. I cannot speak for those individuals who are, and I cannot begin to comprehend – let alone empathize with – their situation. So, what can I do? What will I do?

¹ *My Husband, My Country* is a solo dance theatre work confronting my ambiguous relationship with a country I know and love in the face of the inhuman brutality of Guantanamo, Abu Ghraib, and other sites of illegal torture. In this piece I confront my own pain, anger, and guilt over being implicated in torture, as an American, by visiting the violation on myself. Through my character I play both the victim and the torturer – but here the victim is an American housewife and the torturer an abusive husband. Thus I seek to begin to comprehend the pain of prisoners of war through the mode of domestic violence, wherein I am both the violator and the violated.



Fig. 2: Allison Wyper in *My Husband, My Country* (2008). Courtesy of Liz Filippone

‘Your body has become not yours only, nor left my body mine only’ (Whitman 160). Images of the prisoner enter me, leaving a deep scar. I am haunted, inconsolable, sick with guilt as crimes against humanity are perpetrated in my name. *Witness* is a ritual dedicated to the victims of wrongful incarceration and torture whose images have been imprinted into us – we cannot erase them, wash them off, or cut them out. The performers surrender sight and touch, and give up their voices in invocation, calling forth the always excluded, the disappeared, the voiceless, the erased. Movement and imagery are born from these ghost memories of grief, anger – even love.

We cannot feel another's pain. It is non-transferable. To represent people's pain is, often, to reproduce the violence enacted against them.² How disturbing, then, when one identifies more readily with the one who inflicts pain, perhaps because on some level we know that we are implicated in their offenses. By virtue of my wealth, I admit, I am implicated in another's poverty. By virtue of your consumption, you might confess, you are implicated in another's exploitation. Because in the U.S. we are marked as potential victims of terrorist attacks, we are implicated in the perpetuation of a 'War on Terror.' By virtue of our citizenship, let us testify, we are implicated in official acts of violence enacted by our government.

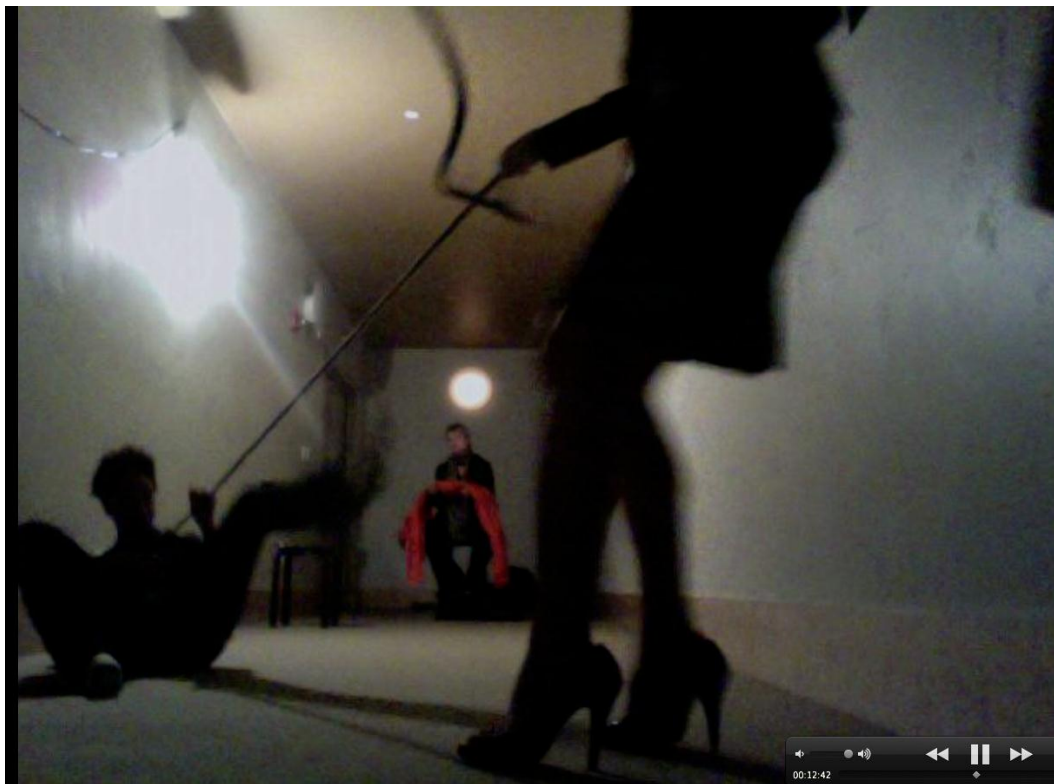


Fig. 3: *Witness*, UCLA (2011). Courtesy of Allison Wyper.

² Wendy S. Hesford, in her analysis of the Abu Ghraib torture photos and their reception in contexts ranging from protests to galleries ('Staging Terror'), references Holocaust studies and the idea of 'traumatic repetition' which 'produces a second order of trauma [...] at the level of technique' (32). Trauma studies scholars have recently debated the ethics of reproducing trauma in order to 'work through' it. Dominick La Capra, for instance, advocates an approach of 'empathetic unsettlement' as an alternative that would allow one to put oneself in another's position without usurping their place (qtd. in Hesford 34). Hesford uses the 'traumatic real' to 'articulate trauma's resistance to transparent symbolism, and also the cultural fascination with and historical demands for its documentation' (32) while allowing the possibility of critical repetition, whether hegemonic or counter-hegemonic (34-35).

Every day violent actions are performed in your name without your consent. This is the core of *Witness*. Howard Zinn's provocative book title advises: *You Can't be Neutral on a Moving Train*. Like Zinn, I act from my belief that inaction is implicit consent. *Witness* confronts you with the fact that you are part of a system that you may not understand, may not agree with, but of which you are already an agent. Suddenly you find yourself the protagonist of a 'bad script' (Taylor 220), perpetuating the master narrative because you are trapped within it.³

Torture

In *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry writes that torture is a performance wherein the extreme physical pain of the prisoner is converted into a spectacle of the torturer's power and, by extension, that of the dominant regime. As on the stage, all objects become props, taking on symbolic significance. In the torture chamber (the 'theatre' of torture), all objects become weapons; even the walls and floor become weapons. The body of the prisoner is used against him/her when it is forced into stress positions. The torturer usurps and absorbs the voice of the prisoner, declaring, 'Your screams and forced confession can and will be used against you.'

'Power is cautious,' Scarry writes. 'It covers itself. It bases itself in another's pain and prevents all recognition that there is 'another' by looped circles that ensure its own solipsism' (59). The torturer denies the emphatic realness of the prisoner's pain, drawing himself away from embodied sentience into the detached spectacle of his own power. He further assures his

³ In 'Trapped in Bad Scripts: The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo' Diana Taylor argues that because they were already cast in the role of 'mothers,' the demonstrations by these Argentine mother-activists reinforced the masculine hegemonic narrative of the state even though their demonstrations were intended as civil disobedience. 'Thus the Madres were trapped in a *bad script*, a narrative activated by the junta and which they themselves, no doubt unconsciously, reenacted' (my emphasis, Taylor 220).

dispassion and averts sympathy by creating a new fiction of his own suffering. He, after all, is forced to witness these painful acts as part of his duty.⁴

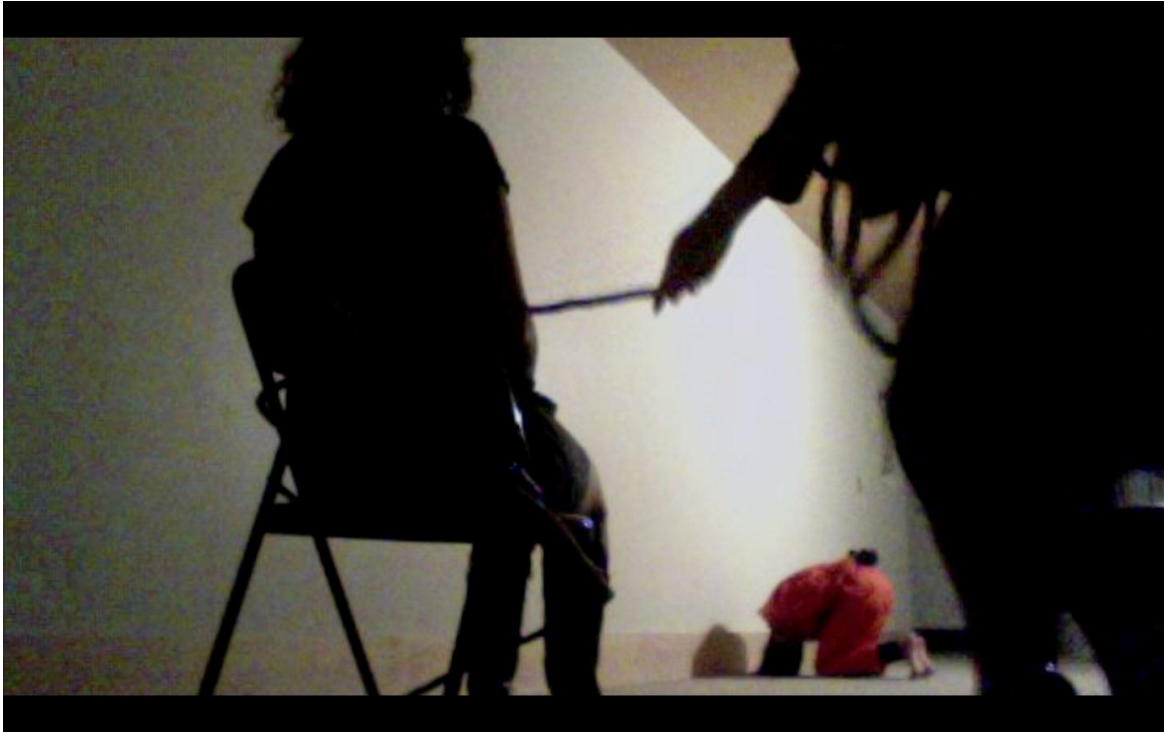


Fig. 4: *Witness*, UCLA (2011). Courtesy of Allison Wyper.

In *Witness*, as we watch others we are also conscious of being watched; our behavior is policed both from without and from within. I – the choreographer, the torturer – witness Sonia, my performer, my victim, blindfolded, moving through a choreography of stress positions, her hands behind her back, endlessly whispering an invocation (*Your body has become not yours only...*) into the walls, as if calling forth the ghosts of victims past. I watch her, as the Witness watches me, commanding and correcting Sonia. The Witness watches me as others outside the

⁴ Scarry cites Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* in which Arendt explains that in World War II Germany, Himmler regularly spoke of the horror of having to watch, let alone perform, acts of torture and genocide in pursuance of duty, directing pity toward the soldier and away from the prisoner (58-59).

room witness her through a television monitor, see her as I bind her to her chair, see Sonia lying prone at her feet, crawling up her body. As Sonia whispers her invocation into the Witness's ear, begging her to repeat it back, I record their urgent exchange on cassette tape. The Witness agrees to participate, unsure exactly what action her assent sets in motion (Fig. 4).

Where Scarry's torturer draws himself away from the prisoner, his power extracting him from any embodied animal pity, here our Witnessing bodies are shared and our positions unstable (*...Nor left my body mine only...*). The Witness is asked to sign a liability waiver, record her name on tape, and vow to remain in the theatre for the duration of the performance. She is catalogued, archived, documented, and monitored. She is asked to take Sonia's leather gloves, place her hands in the noose-end of a rope and be tied to her chair, all the while being recorded, monitored, and watched. The Witness has no stable vantage point from which to stand and gaze in horror. She cannot stand because there is no stable ground to stand upon. She is literally bound to her position 'center stage.' If she gropes for hands to hold her up, she finds that they are also her hands, and she is holding up the other, who is also herself. Her body has become not hers only. Like the secretary who types the prisoner's confessions, these floating pronouns have disembodied her, re-embodied her, and cast loose the anchor of her subjectivity (Fuentes).

How *Witness* Works

Audience members sign up online for individual half-hour showings. On the day of her appointment, the single viewer arrives at the performance space, where she is asked to fill out a liability release form, then remove her shoes and place any other personal items in a box for the duration of the performance.



Fig. 5: *Witness*, UCLA (2011). Courtesy of Nguyen Nguyen.

She enters a small room equipped with a video camera that projects her image on a TV monitor outside for passers-by to see (Fig. 5). Inside this small room the viewer participates in an interactive performance tailored specifically to her. Like a participant in Stanley Milgram's infamous obedience experiments,⁵ she enters into a set of protocols and (in this case, theatrical) conventions that she recognizes, that in fact presuppose her passivity, so that when commanded to intervene, she must decide when to help, when to disobey, and when to just let things happen. As she leaves, she is handed a survey asking her to evaluate her own participation (Fig. 6).

Did I remove my shoes? (Yes or No.)

⁵ Stanley Milgram conducted a series of experiments in the early 1960s that focused on why people (specifically men) obey authority. In his experiments his subjects were instructed to participate in a scientific study on the effects of punishment on memory and learning by administering what they believed to be painful electric shocks to a passive victim in an electric chair. He found that most of the men complied willingly, without significant moral objection, and arguably under no significant threat or coercion. Milgram claimed his experiments helped explain why Nazi soldiers were so easily compelled to perform the atrocities they did (Helm and Morelli 321-22).

Did I shine the flashlight when and where I was instructed?

Did I use the rope to drag the choreographer across the floor of the theatre?

Throughout this performance the Witness is repeatedly asked to act, to sign her name (ultimately on my body), and to record her voice on tape, testifying that she has taken part. During this performance she repeatedly confronts her inhibitions, asking, *how far am I willing to go, to get involved? How much will I risk?*

Record of Witness Participation

Name: _____

Date: ____/____/_____

Please check the appropriate box, and retain this form as a record of your participation in this performance.

Action:	Yes	No
1. I relinquished my shoes and other personal items as requested by Hostess.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. I agreed, on audiotape, to remain in the Theater for duration of performance.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. I consented to be tied to the chair.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. I took the gloves.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. I spoke the invocation, "Your body has become not yours only, nor left my body mine only," which was recorded on audiotape.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. I held "the Prisoner" in my arms, as represented by the Orange Jumpsuit.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. I used the Rope to drag the Choreographer across the floor of the Theater.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. I shined the Flashlight when and where I was instructed.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. I removed the Red Heels from the Performer's feet.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10. When asked what I wanted to do, I performed a gesture that was meaningful within the context of the performance.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
11. I signed the Choreographer's body.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Thank you for your participation.

Please visit www.allisonwyper.com/witness to comment on your experience.

Fig 6: Record of Witness Participation. *Witness* UCLA (2011).

Examples of Witness Tactics

At the climax of the performance, the performers ask the Witness, 'What do you want to do now?' The Witness is instructed: 'perform a gesture or a series of gestures that you feel need(s) to happen now.' The following table roughly defines the range of participant behaviors based on my interaction with approximately 150 Witnesses.

Tactics: <i>Types of responses*</i>	What the Witness does: <i>Examples of behavior**</i>
Conversation or speech	Asks questions. Makes impressive speeches or otherwise performs (usually liberal) politics. Critiques or comments on the choreography (i.e. 'goes meta').
Counter-performance	Eagerly puts on costume and performs for the camera (either keeping with the themes of the piece, or diverging into other material entirely).
Restoration or making amends	Makes performers hug, dance, or apologize to one another. Might participate in hugging, dancing, apologizing. Asks the performers what they want to do.
Silence	Chooses to 'do nothing,' or asks to sit silently for the entire time.
Enacts revenge	Takes sides, and punishes either the Performer or the Choreographer (ties them up, etc.)
Humor	Makes jokes. Sings children's songs (e.g. 'Row, Row, Row Your Boat').
Full compliance	Does everything the performers tell him/her to do.
Restore balance	Asks Choreographer to put her clothes back on.
Symbolic engagement	Performs a ritualistic rite involving costumes & props, such as ritual burial, to disempower the weapons of violence.

	Dresses him/herself in props and costumes and performs an action that invokes the spirits of (usually) the victims or performs some symbolic action of closure.
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** Note: Sometimes one Witness will employ a range of tactics, not just one: for example, performing his/her liberal politics in a display of equanimity by vowing not to hurt the performers if they vow not to hurt one another. A counter-performance may also be an attempt to restore balance, if, for example, the Witness takes off her/his clothes and dresses the choreographer in them, then puts on the orange jumpsuit and goes on hands and knees before the camera.*

*** All of these actions have been performed by actual Witnesses.*

Witnessing

This performance works from the point of view that witnessing is a function of community. Here we understand witnessing as watching ourselves watching, knowing that our watching is a task given to us, our social duty to one another. It marks that something indeed took place, a rite was performed, a change was made, a confession given, a vow taken (or broken), a wrongdoing perpetrated, a crime committed, a spirit felt, a knot tied, an initiation performed. The embodied presence of the Witness changes the thing witnessed. The event is as it is because the Witness is there, thus the event witnesses the Witness.

The Witness is traditionally positioned at a remove from the oath, crime, or execution. The Witness is distant from the act. Witnesses observe, and in their observing the act is consecrated (or exposed). The Witness is the eye of the community, embodying the many. Under the gaze of the Witness, grievance is aired, vows are spoken, vice is purged, and justice is enacted.

Witnessing is also a choreography that we give to the participants, carefully positioning them in relation to our bodies, our costumes, and the props ('weapons') with which we perform

our ritual, our own act of witnessing. As Witness Marcela Fuentes observed, 'In this piece, witnessing is our score, the corporeal script that cracks open the role of the spectator, summoning the ethical dimension of watching a controversial event. In *Witness*, the supposedly neutral viewer becomes a co-participant in the action' ('One Viewer' n.p.). An orange prison jumpsuit laid at the Witness's feet becomes at once her shadow, a corpse, a supplicant, and an invitation to wear it and inhabit the body of the victim (Fig 7).



Fig. 7: *Witness*, UCLA (2011). Courtesy of Nguyen Nguyen.

Confronting our Limits

This performance asks us to reflect upon our limits of engagement. What actions do we take when we encounter injustice? Do we protest with a hundred other activists? Give money to the woman on the street corner? Help a bullied performer retaliate against her aggressor by dragging her aggressor across a room with a rope (Fig. 8)? Whose side do we take? How do we perform pity, empathy, identification? Adrian Piper describes the process of identification across difference as ‘modal imagination:’ that is, our ability to ‘extend our conception of reality – and, in particular, of human beings – beyond our immediate experience of the indexical present. This leap is a necessary condition for experiencing compassion for others’ (qtd. in Kester 77). It is how our contingent identities of self might be shifted and reformed through dialogical encounter with someone different. But witnessing, and the critical reflexivity that I maintain it demands, is far more complicated than sympathizing with a victim. ‘So far as we feel sympathy,’ Susan Sontag writes, ‘we feel we are not accomplices to what caused the suffering. Our sympathy proclaims our innocence as well as our impotence. To set aside the sympathy we extend to others beset by war and murderous politics for a reflection on how our privileges are located on the same map as their suffering, and may – in ways we might prefer not to imagine – be linked to their suffering [...] is a task for which the painful, stirring images supply only an initial spark’ (102-103).

It is my hope that *Witness*, in its raw intimacy, is a potent participatory intervention. Compassion and disgust, pleasure and control, love and pain, play themselves out on the razor’s edge of fear and desire in this intimate space. These acts of brutality, albeit ‘staged,’ are performed in front of you: you touch the rope, you look us, the performers, in the eye, together we touch and feel. The Witness is asked to become a performer, to intervene, and finally to

decide what happens next. S/he is asked to act, with us, in the space, to come up with an ending, to make a symbolic gesture, and perhaps even to fail and thus confront the fact of failure.



Fig. 8: *Witness*, UCLA (2011). Courtesy of Nguyen Nguyen.

I imagine that as we part we each carry within us the stinging hum of touch, the burn of rope, the chill of blindfold, painfully recalling how easily we slipped from watching into doing, from the role of Witness, to torturer, to victim and back again. Would we have done these things if we were not set up? Are we unconsciously doing them all the time? Am I torturing without my knowledge? Yesterday I might have said no, but today I am not so sure. My sense of self has been ruptured and I am not only me. The ink of your signature has entered my bloodstream (Fig.

9). The fibers of the rope you pulled have hardened my skin, changing the shape of my hands. Your silence rings in my ears. ‘All is recall’d as we flit by each other,’ Whitman sings (*Leaves* 160, line 4).

You give me the pleasure of your eyes, face, flesh, as we pass, you take of my beard, breast, hands, in return, / I am not to speak to you, I am to think of you when I sit alone or wake at night alone, / I am to wait, I do not doubt I am to meet you again, / I am to see to it that I do not lose you. (Lines 7-10)

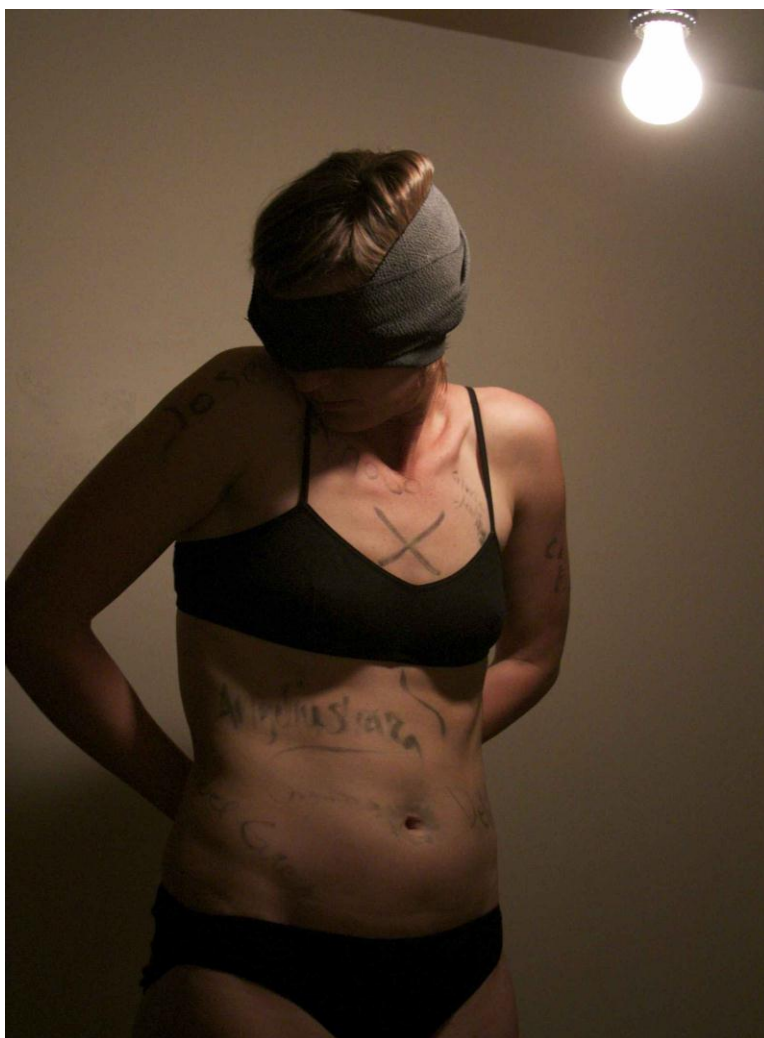


Fig 9: *Witness*, UCLA (2011). Courtesy of Nguyen Nguyen.

In Defense of Disorientation

Ambiguity (simultaneous pushing and pulling, attraction and repulsion) is a tactic that allows me to destabilize familiar systems of representation and power dynamics. Disorientation (white noise, blindfolding the Witness, and seemingly arbitrary power shifts) is another. For example, the mechanism that causes power to shift (from oppressor to victim, from watcher to watched) must remain hidden in order for the shift to be unpredictable in relation to the Witness. This piece is not about knowing *why* power shifts; it is about experiencing the slippery contingent nature of power, agency, domination, and authority, in order to recognize that there might be agency when none is perceived, and to question the idea of concrete moral or political authority at all. *Witness* approaches what Claire Bishop has termed 'relational antagonism,' that is, a dialogical encounter that presupposes a divided subject and is 'predicated not on social harmony, but on exposing that which is repressed in sustaining the semblance of this harmony [...] thereby provid[ing] a more concrete and polemical grounds for rethinking our relationship to the world and to one another' (79). This work combats the citizens' perceptions of their own powerlessness and lack of responsibility in relation to injustice. Inaction is not impotence; it is the performance of consent. The notion that sympathy excuses inaction, that I am a good guy because I feel for the victim or contribute financially to the good guy cause, is here obliterated.

In *Witness*, shared/exchanged roles (Witness, victim, oppressor, performer) set up a freeing mobility of spectator identification that crosses perceived borders between good and evil, producing an ambiguous sense of simultaneous freedom/agency and guilt/culpability. This exchange and mobility supports the theme that your body is not only your own. The victim's body is the property of the oppressor. The victim's body is abused by the torturer. The pain in the body of the watched elicits pain in the watcher's body – but this pain is only the faintest echo of

the original injury, something closer to nausea (a symptom of disorientation). Each wound is my wound. In this performance, no one occupies a discreet and isolated position – that privilege is relinquished upon entry. You may not hide in the background, nor in the darkened house of the theatre. Instead you are hyper-visible, in close personal proximity to the performers and at the same time captured on film (recorded) and a surveillance monitor (live video feed). In this intimate proximity the problems of the world are in your lap, in your hand, looking you in the eye. The television turns its gaze onto you, scrutinizing your every gesture.



Fig 10: *Witness [re:mixed]*, Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (2011). Courtesy of LACE (Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions).

Power and Agency

In *Witness*, power is signified by verticality (heels, the right to stand up) and by the privilege of watching (via camera or the blindfold-free eye). Power is also evoked through the extreme sexuality of costuming (particularly my tight business suit and red stiletto heels) and the

eroticism of the choreography. The first major shift of power in the room occurs when Sonia takes hold of my body, transfers her blindfold onto me, and then cradles my tense body to her chest and dances with me. This seductive dance happens a foot away from the Witness, who enjoys not only the brief respite from acute participation, but also the consumption of erotic spectacle. The usurpation of power by the formerly victimized Sonia is not peaceful or utopian, however. Shoving me violently against the wall, she assumes my role as torturer, and her position of power is shared with the Witness who holds the flashlight, the rope, the gloves – the instruments of domination – as I am literally stripped of my power, down to my underwear. At the climax of this coup the Witness points the flashlight at my body as I crouch on all fours, in a posture of utter defeat and humiliation. At this moment the ultimate aggression of the Witness is in her gaze, which echoes my gaze when I looked at those infamous photos for the first, second, tenth time, and the gazes of millions like me. With each look, this violent act of humiliation and abuse is replicated, repeated, over and over again.⁶

Power is also signified in this performance by the undeniable authority of theatrical convention: the artist is the boss, and you will do what she says because your participation is expected in the theatrical exchange. More precisely, you come to the theatre in order to be entertained or pleased. That is to say, you come to consume. If the artist asks you to do something, you comply only because you expect to be rewarded with a pleasing or entertaining spectacle. Your participation is ultimately a conditional and self-gratifying gesture. Over all of the individuals in the theatre, the institution (UCLA, for example) retains supreme legal

⁶ In *A Field Guide for Female Interrogators*, Coco Fusco performs an extensive analysis of how female sexuality and sexual violence by female officers has been employed in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Guantanamo Bay by U.S. Military Police in their interrogations of prisoners, usually in order to shame prisoners into submission or confession. Fusco additionally makes an argument that sexuality and sexual consumption of the female body can deflect ethical scrutiny, and that the sexualized body in this context becomes a spectacle, obscuring serious understanding of the torture that the U.S. routinely performs

authority, as signified by the mandatory release forms and modifications to the choreography to ensure the viewer's safety. And then of course there is the inner voice of moral authority that follows you home, your record of participation hidden in your pocket.



Fig. 11: *Witness, POW!POW!POW!*, Action Art Festival (2010). Courtesy of Nora Raggio.

So, where is the agency here? This concern has haunted me throughout my creative process. What if Witnesses leave this piece feeling freshly burdened by the reality of their guilt and implication, and feeling that no matter how many letters they write or dollars they donate they are ultimately powerless? Where is the activist efficacy in a project that refuses to engage with neoliberal narratives of socioeconomic development that have supported projects like the Peace Corps for decades, not to mention more conservative notions of charity and brotherhood? In the end, I have to trust that critical reflexivity is productive for an activist project like this. I have to trust that there is more danger in the cozy self-satisfaction of the first world bleeding-

heart consumer than in the dethroned, dizzy, nauseous acknowledgement of our participation in acts of atrocity.



Fig. 12: *Witness [re:mixed]*, Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (2011). Courtesy of LACE.

Of course Witnesses can also leave this piece totally unaffected and content in their worldviews. *Witness* is different from the kind of agit-prop political theatre that leads the viewer directly to an inevitable conclusion of pointed outrage. Far from presenting a political point of view writ large, *Witness* presents entirely contradictory information, disorienting rather than orienting the viewers, making them aware of their own complicity, and yes, depleting their agency in the process. In *Witness* you are exposed to the ways in which your agency is compromised. *Witness* challenges the liberal notion of agency itself. The challenge becomes: how do you exercise your agency strategically so as not to compromise your moral beliefs? As Fuentes puts it, 'the performance turns compliant spectators into accountable witnesses' ('One

Viewer' n.p.). You have crossed the threshold, surrendered your voice, sight, and body, and now, you must act.

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