

March 22nd - May 4th, 2019

That which
identifies them,
like the eye of
the cyclops

Beatriz Santiago Muñoz

Performance with Marién Vélez:
March 23 @ 2pm

Monique Wittig's 1969 novel *Les Guérillères*, is a speculative fiction that depicts the world after a literal battle of the sexes in which women have overturned the patriarchy. Wittig's novel takes the form of brief paragraphs arranged in a way that obfuscates linear narrative; the individual paragraphs could stand alone as prose poems. It is as much a radical imagining of power and gender as it is a radical experiment with language. Many sentences begin with "The women..." as the subject. Though in this phrasing, the English translation doesn't actually do justice to Wittig's intent. In the French, Wittig instead used *elles*, a feminine plural pronoun which translates to "they" but specifically a feminine form of "they." The more commonly used *ils* is a masculine pronoun, and would be used in any instance when "they" includes multiple genders. In the English translation of *elles* to "the women," the language maintains the gender, but loses the proposition Wittig is making in trying to imagine a collectivized universal feminine. Wittig writes, "In *Les Guérillères*, I try to universalize the point of view of *elles*. The goal of my approach is not to feminize the world but to make the categories of sex obsolete in language. I, therefore, set up *elles* in the text as the absolute subject of the world." ¹

At the start of Beatriz Santiago Muñoz's three-channel video installation *That which identifies them, like the eye of the cyclops*, a narrator speaks: "She says, have there ever been two people who could see the same image reflected in one pane of glass? Is this the way language is supposed to work, the same reflection for everyone?" *Les Guérillères* is the inspiration for Santiago Muñoz's work, and here, the narrator summons her, in this rhetorical questioning. In her careful consideration of the use of pronouns in her novel, Wittig was making a proposition for how entrenched power structures of gender in the world may be reimagined via language: which subjective positions are included in the plural?

In a practice primarily composed of film and video works, the subjective position of a camera is one that Santiago Muñoz works constantly to complicate. Though her work contains formal, aesthetic, and structural properties that variously resonate with traditions of ethnography and avant-garde cinema, my interest in Santiago Muñoz's films is where they operate on other registers. One significant reference is how they are in dialogue with Brazilian theatre artist Augusto Boal. Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed, which drew heavily from the writings of Paulo Freire,

worked in solidarity with radical leftist movements and facilitated a theatrical structure that blurred the boundaries between performers and audience.

In one of Boal's exercises, collective creation of a mask, a group of people mingle around a room, one actor "introduces some characteristic or other of her way of walking, or talking, or thinking" as the others observe and try to reproduce this characteristic. As the group syncs up in unison, a new characteristic is introduced, and the process repeats until "all the actors are performing the same collectively created mask."² This exercise embodies a core tenet of Boal's work—the facilitation of dialogue, of engendering positions that understand listening as an active process that co-exists with speaking/performing.

Boalian theatre influences the way Santiago Muñoz interacts with participants who appear in her films. What transpires in her films is the product of a thoughtful and caring process, one that exudes generosity and a relational ethic. This influence can extend beyond social interactions, carrying through to how she works with her camera. As an artist working with moving images, the camera is a constant intermediary in her process. Though

she is constantly engaged in looking, I characterize that act of looking as one without the same acquisitive gaze that is often at work in cinema. Still an instrument of seeing, Santiago Muñoz is perhaps asking with her camera, how can a cinema engage in an act of looking while also listening?

In re-imagining Wittig's novel for *That which identifies them, like the eye of the cyclops*, Santiago Muñoz does not strictly adapt the text as a narrative. The violent clashes that hang as a spectre over Les Guérillères sit towards the background here, and the focus is instead on the imaginary afterwards of the society that comes out of these clashes. The three segments are made with the participation of women, most of whom Santiago Muñoz has known and worked with over many years.

What is seen on the three channels of the film is a mix of images that could be read as records of something that has really happened and gestures that are more clearly performed. On the center screen, a journey down a river takes us through a city, under bridges, and to an enclave in the forest where women are working with the land: laying gravel for a foundation, surveying vegetation, and tending to chickens and goats. On each

side, the camera follows more focused scenes. To the left, Marién Vélez, who also collaborates with Santiago Muñoz on the performance *MOUTHER*, focuses and adjusts theatrical lighting fixtures onto the floors and walls of an empty warehouse. On the right, artist Ivelisse Jiménez holds colored pieces of plexiglas up, looking through them to the sky and landscape beyond. A single soundtrack stands as a fourth element that points at different times to and across the three projections. When the film begins, the narrator seems to be speaking about Jiménez, on the right screen, as she tries to see the world through these colored panes. Later we hear the narrator ask, “Do you see a pink strip that cuts the green in half?” which coincides with Vélez making an arrangement with her lights that seem to be described by this narrator.

In one segment, the narrator recounts a conversation with local landowner: “I need an image of horses, do you have any in your land? He said, yes, all of the mares are together. I said, all mares, that’s perfect. He said, I know.” There’s something so simple and telling of this moment, this idea that what is desired, that one one is looking for, it’s right there. This utopia, after a war of the sexes, where the notion of the collective and the individual can

be considered together, is not just a future imaginary, but can possibly be a present condition. This is perhaps most evident at the film’s end, where the left and right projections go black, and the focus falls to the center screen where Macha Colón, the onstage persona of artist Gisela Rosario Ramos, performs in a club. Here, the beats, the lights, the dancing of not only Macha Colón, but the room full of women in the club, fervently embody an ecstatic resistance of Wittig’s *elles*.

— Pablo de Ocampo

1. Wittig, Monique, “The Mark of Gender”, *The Straight Mind: And Other Essays*, Boston: Beacon Press, p. 85

2. Boal, Augusto, *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*, translated: Adrian Jackson, London: Routledge, p. 150

MOUTHER

performance response by Stacey Ho

A darkened room. There are two portable lecterns. One is situated directly in front of us, the other further back and to the side. Beatriz Santiago Muñoz moves between these two positions. Speaking at the lectern toward the back, she serves as the role of narrator. Moving to the front, she acts as the various individuated subjects that populate this performance. We face her and Marién, but our seats are arranged in small rows that form a flying V so that the territory of performer and audience encroach upon one another. Marién Vélez works with a collection of light sources spread out on the floor. Light changes from tungsten yellow to deep red. Light silhouettes the pattern created from a scrap of mesh, a crystal bowl, raindrops against a glass pane, leaves falling on water. The shape of light travels across the room, rests above our heads, lingers here and there on a detail, a crack of a shuttered window where the light of day peeks through. This is *MOUTHER*, Monique Wittig's 1969 novel *Les Guérillères* reimagined as film without film. The film becomes the sound of Santiago Muñoz laying cinematic scenes before you with her voice. The film becomes the shape of light pressing itself against responsive material—if not a piece of celluloid coated in photosensitive chemical, then perhaps the optic nerve, the walls of a room. I think of the antiquated Victorian belief that

when you die, the last image you see is imprinted into the back of your eyes. Outside, it is a beautiful spring afternoon. Latecomers, accustomed to the bright sun, grope about in the dark. In this room, this theatre, all the objects that populate the outside world are removed in an attempt to bring something into being without relying on previous models of representation.

Though the female subjects of *Les Guérillères* eschew any notion of history, many of them come forward to speak of the myths, stories, and legends of their warrior society. These rich aphoristic tales allude to truths from an alternate genealogy centred around the feminine. In *MOUTHER*, these tale tellers become filmmakers who also destroy their own films. The filmmakers allude to scenes of factories, abortions, fires, bodies, horses, light. Scenes move seamlessly back and forth between Santiago Muñoz and Wittig's words. This combination mirrors the wordplay of the performance's portmanteau title. *MOUTHER* brings together the words MOTHER and MOUTH, evoking how words are material objects formed in the cavern of a mouth that also suckles, bites, and wails. MOUTH/MOTHER points to visceral and liminal ways of being that language cannot possibly represent, whether through cinematic conventions or linguistic

categories, especially outside of the constraints of heteropatriarchy. Wittig's warriors tear down representational structures in order to imagine something new. Using Wittig's circular-shaped zero as a starting point, Santiago Muñoz suggests a new epistemology that describes the world through things like analogy, materiality, sensorial proximity, gesture, and a sociability that extends to animals, land, objects, and their parts. In this mode of representation, the length of the Río Inabon is calculated in relation to visible and audible markers such as vultures circling in the sky. In Nicaraguan Sign Language, the sign for pain also touches the place where pain is found in the body.

In revisiting an iconic lesbian separatist text, it is impossible not to invoke the fractious history of feminism itself, or present day strains of radical feminism that use simplistic interpretations of sex and gender to uphold transphobia. However, it is prescient that Wittig's practice recognizes inadequate categories of language produced particularly around feminine and masculine pronouns. Santiago Muñoz points out that in the English translation of *Les Guérillères*, "elles" as the French feminine version of "they", is translated as "the women". Uneasy with the category of woman, Wittig's suggested

translation was "the shes", but her translator believed that this shift in language would be too jarring for readers. In her introduction to *The Lesbian Body*, Wittig's describes her dysphoria in inhabiting the particularly gendered constraints of the French language, where every noun must be classed as feminine or masculine. She describes the necessity of splitting the "I" or "J/e" of her voice as a writer, when the word "writer" in French is itself masculine.

The 'I' [Je] who writes is alien to her own writing at every word because the 'I' [Je] uses a language alien to her; this 'I' [Je] experiences what is alien to her since this 'I' [Je] cannot be 'un ecrivain'. If, in writing je, I adopt this language, this je cannot do so. J/e is the symbol of the lived, rending experience which is m/y writing, of this cutting in two which throughout literature is the exercise of a language which does not constitute m/e as subject. J/e poses the ideological and historic question of feminine subjects.

I can't help it. I know I am supposed to let it go, but I get stuck in the language. I quietly sip my beer during an art opening or stare at a meaningless piece of paper during the collective meeting while a well-meaning woman

assumes that we share the same struggles and experiences. It occurs to me that the French “femme” translates in English to that position Wittig took such pains to avoid, whereas within queer parlance, “femme” calls forth a multiplicity of meanings that straddle the feminine without necessarily occupying that uncomfortable category. When Wittig writes that “Lesbians are not women” in 1978’s *The Straight Mind*, she is describing how her own position and experience does not fit into this category called woman or its requisite modes of representation. When Meghan Murphy is banned on Twitter for saying “Men aren’t women,” she is violently policing how those outside of herself may enter into this category. In her reconsideration of accused transmisogynist Valerie Solanas, Andrea Long Chu half-jokingly outlines how *The SCUM Manifesto* describes men’s lack of an extra X chromosome as the source of their “pussy envy”, positing that “all men are closeted trans women” ...the best of whom confront their own biology to become the most radical of feminist separatists.

Categories shift beneath the words that awkwardly contain them. The worlds that are built with this language play out in deadly ways upon real breathing and kicking bodies. When the shes reject and

destroy the structures of language and representation, Wittig finds a circle in the rubble, an empty zero that is also a vulva, a whole that implies a singular state from which to begin again. However, this state is an impossibility. The mouths that *MOUTHER* invoke are multiple, and sometimes they fight dirty. Santiago Muñoz tells us that “The shes no longer use a language that proceeds by categories. They say that they are neither women nor men, they do not define themselves in relationship to a category of experience but by degrees of difference between each other,” which sounds like a project that I badly want to take part in, but hesitate to give up the particular and, to some, obscure categories that presently help me articulate my difference in the world. The mouths argue about where to begin, finally agreeing only that there never could have been a beginning in the first place. But they are not sure. All the books have been burned, the film is overexposed. All that they know is that they are here, in this darkness, together.

Artist Biography

Beatriz Santiago Muñoz lives and works in San Juan, Puerto Rico. Her work arises out of long periods of observation and documentation, in which the camera is present as an object with social implications and as an instrument mediating aesthetic thought. Her films frequently start out through research into specific social structures, individuals, or events, which she transforms into moving image, at times supported by objects and texts. Santiago Muñoz's recent work has been concerned with post-military land, Haitian poetics, and the sensorial unconscious of anti-colonial movements. Recent solo exhibitions include: *Song, Strategy, Sign* at the New Museum, *A Universe of Fragile Mirrors* at the Pérez Art Museum of Miami, *MATRULLA*, *Sala de Arte Público Siqueiros*, México City; *Post-Military Cinema*, Glasgow International; *The Black Cave*, Gasworks, London. Her work is included in public and private collections, such as the Whitney Museum, Solomon Guggenheim Museum, and Kadist.

List of Works

In the Gallery:

That which identifies them, like the eye of the cyclops

Beatriz Santiago Muñoz
three-channel video installation,
10min 11sec, 2016.
Courtesy of the artist.

**In the Grand Luxe Hall:
Saturday March 23, 2pm**

MOUTHER

Beatriz Santiago Muñoz
and Marién Vélez
Performance, 2016-ongoing.