

Coping with life in the Absurd

Daniela Mora

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Committee:
Aaron Flint Jamison (Chair)
Ellen Garvens
Rebecca Cummins
Michael Swaine
Karen Hartman

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University of Washington

Abstract

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Chair of the Supervising Committee Chair:

Aaron Flint Jamison

School of Art + Art History + Design, Division of Art

This thesis outlines the art practice and ideas of Daniela Mora. Her work investigates the role of audience and art in relation to tourism, cultural practices, and authority. Through the use of video installation, theater, and performance, her work is at the brink of manipulation and philosophical freedom to reject. Her research mainly includes theme parks, Albert Camus, and Alejandro Jodorowsky.

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Introduction

The greatest journey is redefining your purpose--this does not have to be contained within religion, though spirituality and philosophy are apt. My work is a composition of an exaggeration of a reality, in which the audience is made as vulnerable as the artist. The work is to be finished by the audience making this, as a means of a community, the only direct line of communication from artist to audience. As an experience, art must first disrupt your reality to construct an alternative illusion, and ground you to face your new existence. This can be compared to something as established as religion and spirituality, the controlled thrill of a rollercoaster ride, or the distraction of cultural entertainment. As part of our culture, we move around our towns, cities, and countries in order to experience a cultural or familial part of life and death.¹² In moving across environments, your physical and mental self undergoes a transformation inspired by your surroundings and experiences. In my work, I question the ways someone can be transformed through the work. By walking through the work, being moved by the work, or reading, access and intake of new information inevitably affects a person; I am interested in the internalized transformation.

I: Just Capture it, Dummy

Growing up in Florida I had annual passes for one of the Walt Disney Worlds, Universal Studios, and Busch Gardens, and will always be a tourist drone, “oohing” and “ahhing”,

¹ Wright, Daniel. "Hunting Humans: A Future for Tourism in 2200." *Futures* 78-79 (2016): 34.

² In that same article, Seaton is referenced to describe *thanatourism* as “travel...motivated by the desire for actual or symbolic encounters with death...”

looking for the next synthetic thrill. If we consider these rides as an installation work, they become a major source of volunteered anxiety and an immersive aspiration to provide that thrill; to actually be in the creation of another.³ But I'm left wondering, Why and how are these places sustained? Why am I looking for that cheap thrill?

Albert Camus, philosopher, author, journalist, and writer of Absurdism, its inevitability, and presents solutions to this repetitive fate:

It happens that the stage sets collapse. Rising, streetcar, four hours in the office or the factory, meal, streetcar, four hours of work, meal, sleep, and Monday Tuesday Wednesday Thursday Friday and Saturday according to the same rhythm—this path is easily followed most of the time. But one day the "why" arises and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement. "Begins"—this is important. A man who has become conscious of the absurd is forever bound to it.

-Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus⁴

Camus demonstrates the mundanity of life, though finds an existential beauty and a need to embrace the inevitable. The Everyday is not beautiful, yet we get up and continue with our life. At the moment our routines are urgent, crucial, and we plan for the next day, or for one in a far off future. Or we wait for the one thing that makes us stop and reassess what we've been living for—a longing and recognition, a reassurance of ourselves as a thought to someone or something else

Through the writing and instructional monologue of *Singular Reproduction* (Figure 1), I question the equality between production and labor, the relationship between

³ Baber, Katherine, and James Spickard. "Crafting Culture: 'Tradition,' Art, and Music in Disney's 'It's A Small World'." *Journal of Popular Culture* 48, no. 2 (2015): 225-39.

⁴ Albert Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus and other essays*, (New York: Vintage, 1991)

consumer and the market, and hope to dissolve the dependence on guarantees. The viewer is invited to kneel down before a television alter and follow an instruction that will allow them to multiply themselves in a 7-month period to assume a laborious freedom. Installed in a shipping container, the continuous 3D modeled advertisement above the cubical (figure 2) promises relief if they “join now”, though the location and time frame can be a source of anxiety for the viewer. Not unlike many resources today, the final result is never guaranteed as a success on the part of the producer/promoter, giving the fault of failure to the viewer. Ultimately, though distributed in alternative modes of mediation (through DVD sets), the transformation can never physically occur.

II: No One Else Will Do It For Me

If it were sufficient to love, things would be too easy. The more one loves, the stronger the absurd grows. It is not through love that Don Juan goes from woman to woman. It is ridiculous to represent him as a mystic in quest of total love. But it is indeed because he loves them with the same passion and each time with his whole self that he must repeat his gift and his profound quest. Whence each woman hopes to give him what no one ever gives him. Each time they are utterly wrong and merely manage to make him feel the need of that repetition. “At last”, exclaims one of them, “I have given you love.” Can we be surprised that Don Juan laughs at this? “At last? No,” he says, “but once more.” Why should it be essential to love rarely in order to love much?⁵

In terms of self-assurance in life, love, and transformation, I look to Albert Camus on living in the absurd, using the example of Sisyphus and Don Juan, and Alejandro Jodorowsky’s declaration for personal responsibility to freedom.

⁵ Ibid.

As an absurd man, Don Juan is rectified as a man who found his solution. The absurd life pleads for meaning: meaning in which we must find for ourselves, in which something as useless as art presents a relief, an alternative to suicide, a meaning unique to our own. Thus this presents the grandest of all our problems: Where do we find our uniqueness? Once more I am lost in a predicament presented by observed standards.

How can they get it, and I can't? How can you present this feeling of loss?

The human being has intellect, looks for things and doesn't believe it, the intellectual mind doubts everything, but it has emotion, it has a heart. The heart believes. So, we have to guide by our emotional life...Every human being is genius. Everyone is good for something, but not for the same. Everyone has a talent, personal, unique, is unique in eternity, in infinity. There is no one that is like you, ever, you are unique. But you have to discover what your uniqueness is.⁶

Alejandro Jodorowsky, a maker in movies and theatre, poet, musician, and spiritual guru, proposes a solution to the existential crisis human condition. He encourages freedom to the individual to find out who they are, how they function, and how that can function with and for others. Though there is a deep responsibility of the individual to blindly search for that uniqueness, there is hope for me to refuse a standard and recognize my role, the roles of others in life.

On view at the Henry Art Gallery, *The inevitable questions regarding--or, in transformation of--self (part 1-5)* (Figure 3-6) lays out a solitary journey for the viewer. Amidst the labyrinth, the videos act as a sonic guiding device, as well as spiritual transcendence of the character, while the use of a labyrinth acts as a physical and mental

⁶ Jodorowsky, Alejandro. Interviewed by Rene Franco. 2012. *Es de Noche! ... Y ya Llegué con Rene Franco*.

deterrent of the assumed goal of art: get in, look/stare, leave. One by one, the viewers will follow the space to see a portion of the character's bizarre, daily rituals, conflicting curiosity, and metamorphosis. Meanwhile the character is perpetually held in these positions forever, by means of looping video and the audience circling through. In a way, the (sonic) cue entices a queue.

I think it's important to make a distinction as a viewer of how a work of art will transform or manipulate you. Borrowing from the practice of meditation and prayer through a labyrinth, as well as the constructed anticipation of the queue in a theme park ride, the installation is designed to prepare the viewer for an ultimate transformation, mirroring that of the character on the screens.

III: Entering My World, Made For You

To enter a constructed world, the allegorical element in theatre places you on the scene:

(Summer time, outdoors, small town of Plant City, outside Tampa, Florida

This is a student-driver practice lot, in which lines are drawn. Teenagers ranging ages 13-18, in tattered t-shirt, probably owned by their parents, some wear athletic shorts, others wear casual cargo. Most will be in appropriate sneakers, but a handful will wear heavy, bulky, cult-favored boots.

They stand in a line, dripping sweat, their presence smelled in the crowd)

Bandmaster: AHHHTEEN-HUT!

(Teens snap their instruments in unison)

VO: And so I thought about my time in marching band, and why I was risking heat exhaustion as the Florida sun beat on my head, wearing a 30 pound drum, and standing on the asphalt.

(VO is seen wobbling across)

VO: and I was good. I mean, there's a reason they put me, ME, on the 2nd bass drum. It's definitely the hardest one on the line. They have faith in me, I totally got this.

Bandmaster: MORA, WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING?

END

I'm wondering, why did I agree to this? Why did I end up being a part of the march, of the band of fools? But it was that rhythm that occurred between me and the band, the band and the field, and what was on the field and the audience. It was the experience outside of me that became what I could provide. But concern sets in: What happened on that field? The cheers and the roars, the shouts and chants pushed us through. Where is the point that a spectacle can go wrong? How can one use the spectacle as a means of persuasion? After all it's so much easier to follow the existing beat. You can wrap it up and gift it, pick it up at the grocery store on your way home, and it's something that worked for them. They, them, theirs. I wonder how much I am considered in this? Because in a band, everything affects the other, and the next, and so on. It takes a proactive measure for one to yell, "Wait! They're falling behind and about to

knock me down. I can't get to MY spot on time." As a part of the Fools, I became a part of a deeply connected community of different thinkers, joined by pride in our work, in our belief of our dedication to this form, and connected through others, who too have competed and understood the struggles. Our activity, though seemingly unnecessary, was actually what our young minds needed. A community we chose to be in, we fought for. "The Fool knows that the only true madness is to recognize this world as rational."⁷ We performed without care for others, only in our marks which made forms.

I believe the audience's role is to complement the work.⁸ I understand this can be confused as manipulation, but this can be compared in stages to a relationship with someone: Between meeting someone to actually sharing a life together, an experience Likewise in viewing art, if a piece does its job, the viewer will stay, looking at the piece wondering what it is, and why they are kept there. Maybe it's a long gaze, but what if you must walk through it? I believe in leveling with the audience and making the work intimate--a world made for the individual. If we separate works from the white walls of a gallery, its preciousness is no longer determined by the institution, but by the person viewing it. How can I make my work, something that can be touched and experienced, survive in a gallery or museum?⁹

In a set of lenticular prints, *Back, Shake, Bump, Drop* (figure 9) the movements can only be properly viewed by one person at a time. As you drop, so does the figure, and to make it sway side-to-side, so must you. In a time of political and celebrity "puppets",

⁷ Kott, Jan. *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1974).

⁸ As opposed to *compliment*, though welcomed.

⁹ And I say "survive" because through its use, it will be inevitably destroyed.

digitally-edited imaging, and fantastical cinema, the green screen was the (chroma) key to my work, and a doorway to different personal viewings. The dominate role becomes blurred as the viewer acts upon the piece. Here the viewer is familiar with the medium, through its use in advertisements, as well as, already being cued in their direction by the mere physicality of the piece.

Perhaps we can think about a dog (let's call him Francois, the poodle) and his inherent fascination and obsession with catching the dot of a laser pen. The red dot is never there. We think it's our end goal because of the excitement, because it makes our heart pound. But when we reach for it, it goes away. How can we use the red dot to our benefit? How can we use the red dot for the benefit of our community?

So the only things we are left to do is sow conscience. The revolution ended. Now, In the RE-EVOLUTION, we have to change the mind. We have to make a mutation of all of us. And to revise everything: politics, religion, economy, patriotism.¹⁰

It's important to remember that it is a re-evolution by means of reevaluation. This is important for me to remember, as well, when working within my existing structure, to embrace the humanity in these structures, yet also being aware of the fragility of a community.

A Scripted Calamity, introduces ideas of community, theater, authorship, and authority through the use of a card table, instruments, and a pile of scripts. The audience is not given direction, but through their own accord pick up the scripts, which assigns each person a task and a cue. An unexpected interaction occurred (Figure 8) when the

¹⁰ Jodorowsky

initiator (man with drumstick) and another reader (in a red hat) communicated through hand signals. “Speak?”, the red-hatted man motioned with his hands, as the other nodded. This simple gesture encouraged others to participate and complete the performance.

Even though the words I wrote and work I’ve made have been read and occupied by viewers, I’m left to wonder, what I am doing this for? Is there something or someone I’m trying to impress? I believe the work is for an audience. For me, art cannot exist without an audience. I need the audience to sow my seed, to “wonder” with me. So again, I question a construct of living singularly and alone. Do they have me in mind?

...we have [in us] a particle of this divinity that we can call the interior god. That’s our center, and that’s where we have to reach. You are the temple, you are the priest, and you communicate with your interior god, a drop of the divine ocean....we live in a god. They close our eyes so they know we are not aware. We live in an “I” when in reality it’s an “US”.¹¹

And in looking within ourselves, finding our uniqueness, finding our beauty, we realize we are together in this “wretched and magnificent life that is ours”. The goal is not at the end, it’s what’s happening now.

So I beg us all to take a step back, maybe a step down, and realize our world, our role in our community

In my work, I keep this, all of this, in mind, as an immersive experience, as a possible personal solution, as a way to ask you to find yours, and reassess how your presence affects your community and your space.

¹¹ Jodorowsky

Works referenced



(Figure 1) *Singular Reproduction*, 2016, publication. Image courtesy of Daniela Mora



(Figure 2) *Singular Reproduction*, 2016, installation view. Image courtesy of Daniela Mora



(Figure 3-4) *The inevitable questions regarding--or, in transformation of--self (part 1-5)*, 2017, video stills. Image courtesy of Daniela Mora



Figure 5) *The inevitable questions regarding--or, in transformation of--self (part 1-5)*, 2017, installation overview. Image courtesy of Daniela Mora



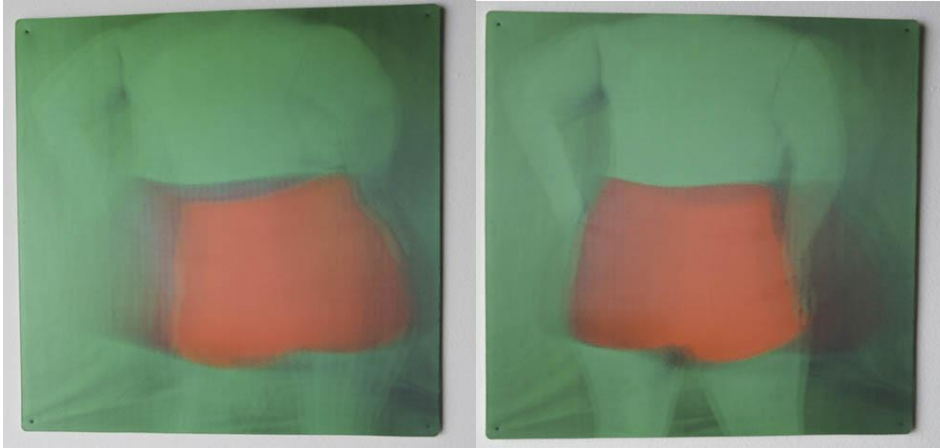
(Figure 6) *The inevitable questions regarding--or, in transformation of--self (part 1-5)*, 2017, video installation. Image courtesy of Daniela Mora



(Figure 7) *A Scripted Calamity*, 2016. Image courtesy of Daniela Mora



(Figure 8) *A Scripted Calamity*, 2016. Image courtesy of Daniela Mora



(Figure 9) *Back, Shake, Bump, Drop*, 2015, lenticular prints, Image courtesy of Daniela Mora

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