

## Performance Matters

# Collective Curation across Difference: Performing Live with Race, Gender, and Sexuality

Sandra Ruiz

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The Syllabus is the Thing: Materialities of the Performance Studies Classroom

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Article abstract

This piece charts the creation of a gallery within an ethnic studies unit, a syllabus in conjunction with said space, and a student-artist group exhibition titled *Objects Who Hold/Objects Who Let Go*. The exhibition asks one to consider how we learn to withhold and let go of the memories that bridge gaps between permanence and ephemerality. Curated in community by the artists themselves, the show drives the audience to embrace this tension of holding on and letting go as one intentionally engages with experimental art that pushes the boundaries of race, gender, and sexuality across expressions of loss and mourning.

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## CLASSROOM EXPERIMENTS

### Collective Curation across Difference: Performing Live with Race, Gender, and Sexuality

Sandra Ruiz

#### Before the Making of the Syllabus: Curiosity and Conflict

Syllabi often materialize from both curiosity and conflict—neither feeling antithetical to the other and both possible entryways into transformative relationships between the educator, pupil, institution, and the politics of study. As a trained performance studies scholar, I have been riding the line between curiosity and conflict in Latinx studies for close to a decade but also riding a similar line within conventional aesthetic sites across the university. Studying minoritarian experimental aesthetics has been challenging for reasons that reveal how interdisciplinary units often unconsciously mimic disciplinary paradigms. Or, how fields built from states of emergency often fall into institutional traps that uphold methodological and epistemological hierarchies, and by consequence, militarize study, curiosity, community building. That is to share that the aesthetic is often conceived of as an afterthought to intellectual, social, and political critical labour and not the driving force behind life-altering movements. And, of course, there's the other side to this as well: as an ethnic studies scholar engaging aesthetics, I have felt similar struggles within normative museums and galleries on campus whereby race, gender, and sexuality are overdetermined and culturally subsumed by the aesthetic practice itself. So, in rethinking interdisciplinary predispositions, I have had to physically carve out space as a thinker, writer, teacher, and curator of contemporary minoritarian performance.

This course began by thinking about how marking space from within Latinx studies might alter the field's epistemological and ontological landscape and place pressure on more dominant art spaces to receive experimental art by artists of colour. Could creating this independent gallery within Latinx studies, which focused on experimental and queer aesthetics, reimagine this (inter)discipline's own ideological boundaries? Could reshaping the field reshape community formation and curatorial politics? How could this new space alter the larger institution's reception of art by artists of colour, minoritarian subjects?

Moved to find answers to these questions, during the spring and summer of 2018, I guided a community of seven women—artists, queer women of colour, and feminists of colour—from across the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign campus, to transform an atypical space in the Department of Latina/Latino Studies into a self-sustaining art gallery. From staff, advisors, student interns, alumni, and artists, ranging from the ages of twenty to fifty-eight, we collectively redesigned a copy machine/computer room into La Estación Gallery. For six months, we worked intentionally to reshape the room's architectural structure, mount devices by paying special attention to light and sound systems, investigate the artist's archive with the artist on site, assemble furniture, install technology, create on-site installations with the artist herself, curate our first exhibition, and secure

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funding from across the university. For all of us, this was the first time we had undertaken such an ambitious project, but we managed through the ebb and flow of place-making, ensuring that we created from a domain of deep conviction and vision, and that while evolving with the process, still placed pressure on stable categories of difference.

Reestablishing the parameters of infrastructure, labour, and curation would be necessary in uniting our respective communities. By reshaping curation into activism and collective reformation, we began to see its role as building networks and, by that consequence, redesigning kinship, as opposed to simply consisting of objects displayed against a white wall. This redistribution of power became essential to dealing with highly experimental art from within a unit often adverse to such practices, and it would essentially serve as a refuge for artists and students existing on the margins of more popular aesthetic sites across campus.

The syllabus below was created after the gallery's first successful year of programming, which included a retrospective of artist Erica Gressman's work, artists' residency, workshops, master classes, cultural events, and a live performance by the artist at the Krannert Art Museum—an event organized by the gallery. The syllabus below is a response to such success and allowed students to curate and create their own work in year two of the gallery's existence.

### **Collective Creations & Curations: Performing Live with Race, Gender, & Sexuality**

This advanced undergraduate and graduate practicum/experimental seminar will teach students how to create their own art and performance pieces and then work collaboratively to curate a group exhibition of said art/performance. Moving between artist and curator, teacher and learner, this course requires that we abandon conventional ideas of making, displaying, organizing, and learning with aesthetics. Specifically, we will engage, create, cultivate, and share aesthetic work that extends a deep and critical understanding of the interplay between race, gender, and sexuality by thinking of modes of difference as an ensemble of entangled parts. Following a performance studies compass, we will approach both art (especially experimental and performance art) and contemporary curation—including exhibitions and media arts—through the lenses of critical theory, embodied practice, and collective learning.

We will work closely with one another as well as with visiting artists, scholars, teachers, and curators, to gain insight into the performative methods that will enhance a collective exhibition in La Estación Gallery, an independent aesthetic site housed in the Department of Latina/Latino Studies, and built from the ground up by staff, students, alumni, and artists. The gallery privileges experimental artwork by minoritarian performance artists, with a particular focus on queer Latinx art. Placing in conversation activist curatorial practices, aesthetic-life-worlds, and collaborative ways of learning and making, we will collectively create an exhibition in which students' work will be at the centre of attention. We will all learn how to work theoretically, creatively, practically, and collectively, always moving from a space of curious care and rigour into an intellectual awareness of self, aesthetic practice, and a responsibility to one another, including a commitment to our objects.

#### **Gallery Social Media Sites**

La Estación Gallery Website: <https://laestaciongallery.weebly.com/>

Instagram: [https://www.instagram.com/la\\_estacion\\_gallery](https://www.instagram.com/la_estacion_gallery)

La Estación Gallery Podcast (run by gallery member s.g. maldonado-vélez): SoundCloud & iTunes!  
@ La Estación Gallery

### Internship Credit

After successful completion of all course requirements, including taking on a curatorial duty and making one's own art object/performance, students will receive a certificate in curating performance that is signed by the professor, LLS academic advisor, and an LLS executive officer.

Internship duties/gallery work will reflect the strengths and interests of students. For example, those interested in installation design will work closely with the installation designer; those interested in social media/graphic design will lead that area; those interested in writing will work closely with me to develop curatorial descriptions, wall tags, etc. As we learn how to both create and curate together, students' needs and interests will be considered and addressed. While welcome, no prior knowledge of making art or curating it is needed to be a member of this seminar, receive internship credit. No student will be turned away if there is a fierce desire to learn and work collaboratively.

### Gallery Mentors

Throughout the semester, we will work closely with La Estación Gallery mentors to both create our own objects and figure out how to collectively display them. Dr. Vouloumis and Erica Gressman will be with us throughout the semester and available to meet online. Dr. Rodriguez will work as our consultant on internship duties, installation, and artmaking.

### Readings

1. *Curatorial Activism: Towards and Ethics of Curating*, 1st ed., by Maura Reilly, Thames & Hudson, 2018.
2. *How Institutions Think: Between Contemporary Art and Curatorial Discourse*, edited by Paul O'Neill, Lucy Steeds, and Mick Wilson, MIT Press, 2017.
3. *The Artist as Curator: An Anthology*, edited by Elena Filipovic, Mousse Publishing, 2017.
4. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, by José Esteban Muñoz, University of Minn. Press, 1999.
5. *Whitewalling: Art, Race, & Protests in 3 Acts*, by Aruna D'Souza, Badlands Unlimited, 2018.
6. *Performance*, by Diana Taylor, Duke University Press, 2016.
7. *After the Party: A Manifesto for Queer of Color Life*, by Joshua Chambers-Letson, NYU Press, 2018.
8. *Hold it Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art*, by Jennifer Doyle, Duke University Press, 2013.
9. *In Rehearsal*, by Autumn Knight, Krannert Art Museum, 2019.
10. *Basquiat's Defacement: The Untold Story*, by the Guggenheim, 2019.
11. *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*, by Fred Moten & Stefano Harney, AK Press, 2013.

### Additional Reading Materials

Most required readings will be made into PDFs and emailed to the class, or several copies will be on reserve for students. In certain cases, and given the length of the specific reading, some readings will be made into hard copies and distributed during class time for your convenience.

### Department & Gallery Contact Information

For access to the gallery, materials, available funding, please contact me (sandruiz@illinois.edu) and gallery managers and collective members: academic advisor & administrative coordinator Dr. Alicia

P. Rodriguez via email at [aprodrig@illinois.edu](mailto:aprodrig@illinois.edu) or M. Laura Castaneda, office specialist via email at [mlcastan@illinois.edu](mailto:mlcastan@illinois.edu). They will be working closely with us throughout the semester (ordering supplies, advising on space, planning events, coordinating workshops, publicity, and offering feedback on planning for the group exhibition). They will also be helping us mount the exhibition. They help manage the gallery and will advise us throughout the process.

## **COURSE REQUIREMENTS**

### **Attendance & Active Participation & Conferences & Curatorial Practice**

Active, careful, and thoughtful participation is central to the success of this course. Coming prepared to class will be how most of your participation is assessed. This means that you are given credit for thoughtfully participating when you attend class. Active participation includes participating in class and small group discussions, encouraging your peers to join the discussion, asking clarifying questions, sharing performance work, participating in curatorial processes, etc. Since class discussion and group work will be essential to this course, I cannot stress enough the following: our classroom will operate as an intellectually rigorous space where ideas are created and shared in the spirit of honesty, integrity, compassion, patience, tenderness, rigour, and generosity.

### **Performative Sketchbook/Notebook**

Each of us will keep a performative sketchbook/notebook in which we will draw, diagram, and/or paint our ideas on topics discussed in class, on sites visited, and readings. This sketchbook/notebook is not meant to require any premeditation; it is to serve as a complement to reading notes, final performance ideas, and theoretical rationale. Approach the blank pages with curiosity and creativity, understanding that the only limits to thinking and dreaming are the colonial grammars we ingest and place on our own imaginations.

### **Final Performance & Theoretical Rationale**

Each student will produce an original art object (this may include live performance, video, sculpture, photography, music, etc.) to showcase during the group exhibition. This art object must be in conversation with readings/theories/workshops learned throughout the semester; and, indeed, should reference the influence of said work in one's theoretical rationale and even on gallery wall tags. Citational practice is an ethical, political, and aesthetic project and should be honoured when engaging legacies of ideas, art projects, and genealogies of work.

### **Grading Distribution**

Attendance & Active Participation & Curation: 45%

Performative Sketchbook/Notebook/Journal: 10%

Final Object/Performance & Theoretical Rationale: 45%

## **COURSE SCHEDULE**

\*Please note that the schedule below is merely a rough skeleton of our course. This syllabus is subject to change during the semester in accordance with both individual and collective needs. Given the nature of this course, class hours will be extended for workshops, master classes, and the curatorial process. Please commit to reserving Fridays for this class and be prepared, during the end of the semester, to work over hours as we create a group exhibition, and you complete your internship credit. Food and snacks will be provided by the gallery.

**Class #1: Feeling Space: Curatorial Choreographies**

Homework: See *Art Since 1948*, an exhibition at Krannert Art Museum, located on the main level, Rosann Gelvin Noel Gallery.

Assignment: Sketch out the layout of the exhibition; chart the art pieces temporally and thematically. How do race, gender, and sexuality participate in the essence of the exhibition? How do history and time interface curatorially? What do you notice about how you are asked to choreograph your body in the space? How is your body hailed, silenced, or welcomed, and what does this tell you about contemporary curatorial practices? Do you, too, feel staged? Stage yourself in the scene you've sketched.

Reading: *How Institutions Think: Between Contemporary Art and Curatorial Discourse*.

(Read this entire book after seeing the exhibition.)

**Class #2: Curatorial Activisms**

Readings: *Curatorial Activism*

**Class #3: Curatorial Ethics & Fugitive Study**

Readings: *Whitewalling: Art, Race, & Protests in 3 Acts*, & excerpts from the *Undercommons*

**Class #4: The Performance of Politics & Politics of Performance**

Readings: *Disidentifications & Performance* (sections)

**Class #5: Minoritarian Performance & Aesthetic Freedoms**

Readings: *After the Party*

Meet the thinker: phone call with Joshua Chambers-Letson (we will be able to ask the scholar questions about his new book).

**Class #6: Curation and Creation in Resonance**

Visiting Curator & Scholar: Dr. Hypatia Vourloumis (Dutch Art Institute)

After Class: Gallery Workshop: 4:30-6:00 p.m.

"Resonating Practices: A Workshop in Rigorous Connectivity Across Aesthetic-Life-Worlds" by Vourloumis (artist-scholar-curator)

Readings: "Repeating Brokenness: Repair as Non-Reproductive Occupation, Improvisation and Speculation." (w/ Gigi Argyropoulou). In "Repair Matters," special issue, *Ephemera: Theory and Politics in Organization Journal*, June 2019.

"Processing Mary Zygouri: The Performance of Performance." *Venus of the Rags 2014 Eleusis: Mary Zygouri*. Fondazione Pistoletto, 2017.

"(Non)performance as Method." Introduction to Performancescapes: Fugitive Athens and the Arts of the Possible symposium, October 2016.

Research Centre for the Humanities in Athens, RCH site, December 2016.

<https://www.rchumanities.gr/en/hypatia-vourloumis/>.

"Settings and Steppings." (w/ Gigi Argyropoulou). Editor's introduction to "On Institutions," special issue, *Performance Research Journal*, August 2015.

“Ten Theses on Touch, or Writing Touch.” In “The Haptic: Thinking through Texture,” special issue, *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*, December 2014. <https://www.womenandperformance.org/ampersand/ampersand-articles/ten-theses-on-touch-or-writing-touch-hypatia-vourloumis.html>.

“Come and See What We Do: Contemporary Migrant Performances in Athens, Greece.” *Theatre Journal*, May 2014.

***Class #7: Difficulty as Method: Creation & Curation***

Readings: *Hold it Against Me*, Jennifer Doyle.

***Class #8: The Artist as Curator***

Readings: Sections from *The Artist as Curator*

***Class #9 & Class #10: Making Space/Making Things***

Making/Rehearsal Time: We will all meet and work together to start creating individual or collaborative art objects or performances to be displayed during the group exhibition. You will move between the seminar place and the gallery to start imagining your object and how it might work in the space.

I will be available during these two weeks for individual and group meetings with students during and outside of office hours. These will be two intensive weeks where we work closely together to be sure that singular/plural needs are met.

***Class #11: Sound & Light in Performance & Curation***

Master class with performance & sound artist/design engineer Erica Gressman

Artist website: <https://www.ericagressman.com/>

Reading for your reference: <https://performancematters-thejournal.com/index.php/pm/article/view/100/167>

Bring your work, object, performance-in-progress to class  
1:00-4:30 p.m. Class Session Extended

***Class #12: Making Space/Making Things***

Rehearsal Time in Gallery

***Class #13: Curatorial Write-Up Workshop***

***Class #14: Exhibition Preparation***

***Class #15 & Class #16: Exhibition***

Final Performances/Two-day Exhibition Opening for *Objects Who Hold/Objects Who Let Go*

## Across College Student Exhibition Objects Who Hold/Objects Who Let Go

The group exhibition *Objects Who Hold, Objects Who Let Go*, curated by Sandra Ruiz and Collective Creations & Curations seminar, with special thanks to and guidance by Alicia P. Rodriguez, M. Laura Castaneda, Erica Gressman, and Hypatia Vouloumis, asks the audience to suspend their senses into the life-world of objects; objects who both carry and release personal stories of suffering, pleasure, desire, and abundant afterlives. How does holding onto a feeling, an entity, also force one to let it go? How can we learn to both withhold and let go of the very memories that bridge gaps between permanence and ephemerality? This show drives the spectator to embrace this tension of holding on and letting go as one engages with experimental works that demand a tender and critical understanding of race, gender, sexuality, and the exuberant life and death of all their differences.

For de Leon in *A spoonful of brown sugar*, the history of cultural pain speaks to the future of social change. Her ceramic installation addresses the frustration of being a minoritarian subject in everyday life by disidentifying and riding the fine line of invitation and confrontation. In gripping history tightly to preserve inherited memories, Segev in *Mielczarskiego 5, Łódź, Poland (subtractive charcoal translation)* embodies and resurrects kinship by both remembering and interpreting the past through charcoal drawings. In the three iterations of *the champ*, s.g. privileges the ephemerality of touch and being touched by activating queer failure and questioning the limit and potentiality of radical intimacy in video, sound, and live performance in the tight space of a bathroom.

In Coby's multimedia *Griefwork (Red Ice)*, the animation of loss reveals the self-consuming, but also universal quality of mourning. For this artist, griefwork is inherently lonely; it's the object's presence that renders this singular act a plural engagement with the senses. In *Breathe with Me*, the quotidian act of breathing forces one to feel the burden of queer and Brown existence over an old tape recorder on loop. Reyes leaves one breathless in order to exhale a different modality for living under the precepts of colonial exhaustion. In a desire to be wanted in a world that renders certain life-forces invisible, Netti welcomes the spectator to share a breath with her. *Inhaling Over Time* sculpturally blurs the thick line between matter and life, human and institution through a press, a gentle prod, an opening and closing. In *Lengua Madre*, Camacho Valencia's mother tongues demand to be heard; in listening for the viewer's affective responses through video art, she restructures language, sound, and sight, staging scenes between a given discourse and a performed identity. For Contreras, meaning is material and spirit, feeling and becoming. In *waterless borders*, a photography-sculptural piece, cultivating a community requires unearthing landscapes for possibility by declaring an intention for something other.

All objects who hold on are also objects who will eventually let go. From video and sound art, sculpture and live performance to multisensory installations and performative drawing, these artists embrace the dynamic interplay of object, subject, and spectator in an attempt to forge affectionate new worlds.



Name	Title of piece	Material used	SHORT Exhibition Text/Description	Duration
<b>Paulina Camacho Valencia</b>  PhD, Art Education	<i><b>Lengua Madre</b></i>	Beef tongue HD Video, Stereo	Gloria Anzaldúa teaches us that “it’s not on paper that you create, but in your innards, in the gut and the living tissue” ( <i>Speaking in Tongues</i> , 1981). Making art through the gut is at the centre of this piece, for your interiority is an extension of your flesh.	18 min.
<b>Melody Contreras</b>  BA, Latina/Latino Studies & Theater	<i><b>waterless borders</b></i>	Dirt, collected seeds, photographs	This piece invites the audience to consider what it means to belong/not belong. As each person drops a seed into the dirt, we are left to wonder about the conditions that allow for anything to grow when material elements are lacking.	
<b>Laura M. Coby</b>  PhD, English	<i><b>Griefwork (Red Ice)</b></i>	Red Ice: acrylic, metal mallet, light Soundscape: the ice that crackles, the ice that breaks; heartbeats & buzzing; a daughter’s breath, a mother’s laugh	The labour of mourning is often put onto women or femme-presenting individuals, and while griefwork is laborious, it is also an honour to carry our lost ones. Though any permanent recreation of ice is always already inanimate, this communal memory project is animated by our collective mourning, griefwork, and life-giving.	23 min.
<b>Alicia O. De León</b>  MA, Art Education	<i><b>A spoonful of brown sugar</b></i>	Brown sugar, ceramic bowl and spoons, note cards	By providing a simultaneously private and public invitation to self-analyze and admit wrongdoing, this piece destabilizes notions of complicity and intends to quietly convict every single spectator. The audience is invited to select their own dosage of sugar, a spoonful; and while the sugar functions as a chaser to help swallow an ugly truth, it also symbolizes the sweetness that awareness, redemption, forgiveness, and knowledge inspire.	

<p><b>s.g. maldonado-vélez</b></p> <p>MFA, Poetry</p>	<p><b>Sound piece:</b> <i>the champ: the sun stood over me all day (for f.a.)</i> <b>Video piece:</b> <i>the champ: hands into fists, buds into flames</i> <b>Live piece:</b> <i>the champ: to touch and be touched</i></p>	<p>Cotton hand wraps, water, bowl, stools, flashlight, boxing gloves, bathroom, electric razor, electric guitar</p>	<p>These pieces explore the life experiences of The Champ, a Latinx genderqueer boxer, who deals with the implications of transphobic language/actions as well as trying to survive by fighting both physically and spiritually. The Champ attempts connection with their opponent through touch before a fight, enacting what Dr. Hypatia Vourloumis states in her third thesis on touch, “Desire to touch and be touched by the amorous other is always also the desire to touch another world.”</p> <p>Includes excerpts from “On Boxing” by Joyce Carol Oates (pub. 1987) and “Transgender Dysphoria Blues” by Against Me! (2014)</p>	<p>Sound piece: 6 min.</p> <p>Video piece: 5 min.</p> <p>Live performance in bathroom: 7-10 min.</p>
<p><b>Katie Netti</b></p> <p>MFA, Sculpture</p>	<p><b><i>Inhaling Over Time</i></b></p>	<p>Wire armature, plastic, styrofoam, bellows</p>	<p>This piece is about navigating resilience as one discovers the importance of nurturance from those around them. While the source of this strength is often unknown, it lives deep in the chest of the body. As the spectator activates the bellows, a new sense of purpose is pumped inside the figure and metaphorically inflated with optimism.</p>	
<p><b>Tamar Segev</b></p> <p>MFA, Painting</p>	<p><b><i>Mielczarskie go 5, Łódź, Poland (subtractive charcoal translation)</i></b></p>	<p>Audio recording, charcoal, kneaded eraser, paper</p>	<p>In creating this performative drawing, I listened to an audio recording of my great-aunt speaking in Hebrew about her hometown of Łódź, Poland and her experience as a Jew during World War II. This piece is a record of embodied listening, interpretation, and the physical burden of inherited memory.</p>	<p>2 hrs.</p>
<p><b>Daniel Reyes</b></p> <p>BA, Latina/Latino</p>	<p><b><i>Breathe With Me</i></b></p>	<p>Recorder, cassette tape, headphones, artist’s breath</p>	<p>This piece demonstrates the tiresome and everyday act of breathing for Brown and queer subjects. By asking the listener to lend a patient ear and</p>	<p>17:38.87 min. On loop</p>

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to breathe with the artist, the viewer is pushed to the limit of their own exhaustion.



Photos by Alicia P. Rodriguez