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[ABSURDUS] corpus: an aesthetic and sensorial examination of gender and ritual in Western society

Nathan Blackwell

University of Colorado Boulder

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[ABSURDUS]corpus

an aesthetic and sensorial examination

of gender and ritual

in Western society

Nathan Blackwell
Department of Theatre and Dance
University of Colorado
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Thesis Advisor: Donna Mejia
Thesis Committee: Michelle Ellsworth, Katie Oliviero, and Ted Stark
Abstract

[ABSURDUS]corpus, an interdisciplinary performance, produced by Nathan Blackwell premiered in the Black Box Theatre of the ATLAS Institute in January 2013. This work was a collaboration between artists in film, sound, visual art and performance. Choreographer and artistic director, Nathan Blackwell examines his experience through the research, creation, and performance processes of [ABSURDUS]corpus.

Blackwell’s research explores the relationship between gender and sexuality throughout history and how they have been dictated by societal structures. From matriarchal societies in the Neolithic age, to contemporary gay men and Western religious institutions—Blackwell explores their relationships and interactions through the lens of theorist Camille Paglia.

Due to the ability of performance to produce physical awareness, emotive sensation, psychological transformation, and social change; it provides a valuable approach to research academic scholarship. Blackwell aims to explore progressive scholarship by merging academic research with kinesthetic research and artistic expression. By opening the possibility of research and academia to the kinesthetic and artistic world, Blackwell engages in the tradition of physical and progressive forms of academic scholarship.
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Director’s Note

[ABSURDUS]corpus is a multi-disciplinary performance that incorporates dance, film, sound and visual art. The work was premiered on January 18-19, 2013 in the Black Box Theatre at the Atlas Institute in Boulder, CO. Under the direction of myself, Nathan Blackwell, I created [ABSURDUS]corpus in collaboration with composer Nate Wheeler, film artist Kyle Monks and in conversation with the dancers. The performance is an exploration of theorist Camille Paglia’s controversial ideas on Apollonian and Dionysian gender constructs.

From matriarchal pre-history and goddess worship, to the Western religious dictations of gender, to the contemporary homosexual man-[ABSURDUS]corpus examines the relationships and intersections between them. The following document is a record and examination of the research (both creative and academic), theories and practices that went into the creation of [ABSURDUS]corpus. Through words and images, this document is an attempt to capture the chronology, aesthetic, process and experience of [ABSURDUS]corpus.

Nathan Blackwell
Inspiration

The following images and writings were apart of the initial process in conceptualizing [ABSURDUS] corpus, and are important for the reader’s understanding of the aesthetic nature of the work.
Male homosexuality may be the most valorous of attempts to evade the femme fatale and to defeat nature. By turning away from the Medusan mother, whether in honor or detestation of her, the male homosexual is one of the greatest forgers of absolutist western identity. But of course nature has won, as she always does, by making disease the price of promiscuous sex.

Camille Paglia
Image 1: Madonna, inspiration for SHE- the Mother Goddess
Image 2: Alexander McQueen design- inspiration for SHE, the deer woman. Costuming inspiration.
Image 3: Religious dictation of a woman’s body - dark and mysterious.
Image 4: Screen shots of Volkan Ergen film- Dionysian woman
Image 5; Sensual female form- mysterious and hidden, collective woman. Inspiration for costuming.
Image 6: Inspiration for movement and costuming.
Image 7: Bondage and erotic male form - inspiration for the Man and opening image.
Image 8: Blurring of gender roles, erotic maleness. Inspiration for men's costumes.
Image 9: Task and suffering, the inspiration for the Man’s movement.
Women spinning - Divinities of shorts, long skirt

Around a goddess female figure suspended above their heads, innocent beehives - unborn to this world.

high voices echo harmonize together as women spin faster and faster.

Stop! Freeze! Shhh!

There is some pattern to their path

Fashion, couture - how does the play a role?

Arguing of the body, or gender; adornment.

Hiding, revealing. Something about the extreme femininity of

The study of the body, physical and psychological, must likely spiritual which is why religions seem to have a huge role in it.

The role of repetition until exhaustion, until resolution - repetition until every person is dead, discarded. We repeat garments until we escape, loss something or find a way that works...
or we just accept it. headache, telling in/doing, resigning.

Great chaos in sympathy? vision;

Monks rolling in rows 弹ash each other on t Hispan - the period of the day.

Leather, narrow strips as a flagellant.

Barbed, hair wrapped around know, infection

constant pain is a reminder

Latin

[Sketches]

[Handwritten notes]

Journal 1: Exploration of ritual/trance movement for Women.
Journal 2: Performance score the entire concept of [ABSURDUS]corpus-
Journal 3: Who is the Mother? This is her origination.
Journal 4: Reasoning for a single man in the performance, my performance trajectory.
These [women] are guardians of life
    These [women] are one, united by their bodies
    These [women] have a duty to the [earth] and to the womb.
    These [women] are strong, warriors of Olympus.
    These [women] are real, not they are not metaphorical.
    These [women] fear their enslavement.
    These [women] are sisters - born of dark [earth].
    These [women] are the forces of nature, rising up.
    These [women] are the [mother].
    These [women] have been sent, to destroy.
    These [women] are we, not I. Many, but one.

I am not one of these [women], I am a [man].

   I am a [woman] → Nunt a [woman].

Sisters
Guardians
Arylies
Energy
[Heads of the Matter]

Am I the only man?
From the air, the gods are descending watching ever present head ever so slightly descending in imperial gesture.

Books arched, heads lifted upwards. Pleasure and relief.

Hands tentatively reaching downwards, downward. Falling bits of heaven.

Cocoon—womb floating in liquid.

Hanging upside down singing—that’s the song. With Amay during the whippings. At the beginning?

Are they revealed that soon? or at end? during last solo.

Journal 6: Initial concept for the womb sculpture that hangs above the men.
Absolutist Western Identity

Tilting back the head, soft opening of the mouth- jaw relaxed. Receptive as the tip of warm skin brushes passed the lips, depositing life and nourishment within the cavity of my mouth. Slowly lowering the head in supplication, backing away in confidence and fear of a soul cleansed. Repeat. Ritual, ceremony consisting of a series of actions performed according to a prescribed order. Ritual, a ceremony of passing, transforming or acknowledging. Physical ritual, social ritual, relational ritual, sexual ritual- ritual permeates our existence. Whether we like to admit the fact, Western religious institutions are the root of the majority of our rituals within Western society; we base our social structure and codes on the principles of these institutions. Christianity, Islam, Judaism- these are all transcendent, monotheistic ideologies that have structured the rituals of the Western world. We live in a culture of ritual, a culture of structured activity and checkpoints each member of society must undertake to exist in compliance with mainstream culture. Within the norms of these constructed rituals there are correct ways of moving, being, interacting and speaking. And heaven help the man/woman/child who does not adhere to this structure.

I grew up in this structure, engulfed within the rituals and ideals of Western Identity. I devoured them as a child, relishing in the beauty of ritual and pattern- the strictly outlined plan for life. But in the midst of it all, there was a haunting of abnormality in my mind; a haunting of a past not rectified and society that was not complete. Felt deep in the body, I experienced a kinesthetic memory of an existence that was not apart of these engrained rituals. It created a deeply penetrating erosion to the structure I had immersed myself in for half my life. A hormonal transformation within my body made this haunting even more evident as my mind and body began to split themself even further from the world I had been raised in.

*Indicates terms defined in glossary on page 81.
Haunting, the reemerging of the past into present memory or reality. The haunting of past experiences that are apart of my heritage in many ways, and their painful interactions with each other. I believe the history of humanity resides in our blood, the transgressions of the past deeply embedded into our genetic and psychological structures. I created the performance [ABSURDUS]corpus as an attempt to engage this conflicted past and bring it into conjunction with the present. It is an attempt to examine the cultures of the past that revered the female body as a place of power and magic— to look at the goddesses and positions women held in the spiritual world of the forgotten past. It is an attempt to look at the gay male and his relationship with ritual and Western society. To examine his experience in a world that is heavily influenced by these ritual-based religions. And to examine how ritual and Western religious institutions have played a role in both the past and the present, how it has dictated the actions and relationships of men and women since their conception.

Though this performance is based on the perceived dichotomies of gender and sexuality, it exists in the knowledge that gender is a social construct. How we perceive people and expect people to act is based on a coded set of rules that have been established through centuries of reinforcement (see Mikkola, Jensen). There are two definitions of humans that must be defined in order to discuss this performance; sex and gender. Sex is the biological identity that defines our bodies, humans are born with physical, chemical and structural characteristics that play a role in how we perceive the world. Three categories of human sex have been defined as of now—female, male and intersexed. These characteristics are purely biological, only based on the physical reality of a person and how they reproduce and is separate from any social exchange (see Mikkola, Jensen). Gender is a non-biological construct that society has created out of the biological difference (see Mikkola, Jensen). It is expressed in infinite ways, each codified by the culture surrounding it; gender roles, norms, traits, behaviors and virtues are all
expected ways of being that are constructed. Gender has nothing to do with biology.

ABSURDUS corpus takes both these definitions into consideration, how sex and gender affect the relationships of men and women now; and throughout history. This was done by examining the biological difference and reality of the male and female bodies and asking how they affect the person and their relationships, and by exploring the fluidity of gender within its constructs and how it is performed in society today.

These dynamics and history, of sexuality and gender, are then looked at through the lens of the theorist and social commentator, Camille Paglia, and her theories on the relationships of gender and sexuality. Paglia took the idea of Apollonian and Dionysian differences in art and society that Frederic Nietzsche wrote about in The Birth of Tragedy and applied them to gender and sexuality. Paglia believes that gender roles and differences are based on sex and have not changed since the birth of humanity—however our perception of sex and how we have prioritized these roles has changed dramatically over time so that Western society is predominantly Apollonian (Paglia 1). According to Paglia, “Western science is a product of the Apollonian mind; its hope is that by naming and classification, by the cold light of intellect, archaic night can be pushed back and defeated.” (Paglia 5) In Paglia’s philosophy, the Apollonian male is based in form and order, a phallic upward thrusting mentality, clean and light—a sky focused cult (Paglia 8). This is balanced by the Dionysian female that is wild, dark, the Vagina Dentata, circular and whole—based in and upheld by the earth (Paglia 13). These two forces are supposed to be in balance, to compete with each other and push humanity forward. If one prevailed over the other human society would lose a part of itself. As Nietzsche pointed out, “Wherever the Dionysian prevailed, the Apollonian was checked and destroyed.... wherever the first Dionysian onslaught was successfully withstood, and the authority and majesty of the Delphic god Apollo exhibited itself as more rigid and
menacing than ever.” (Nietzsche 12) In Western society we have valued the Apollonian upward thrust in education, art and government in order to build the ordered and structured world that we have. But we have forgotten or tried to control the power of the dark Mother that we all come from, the wild untamable earth that we exist on. As Paglia states, “nature breaks its own rules whenever it wants…science is always playing catch-up ball.’ (Paglia 5) Thus we have set up a society based on illusion and imbalance. From Matriarchal pre-history and goddess worship, to the Western religious dictations of gender, to the contemporary homosexual man- [ABSURDUS]corpus examines the relationships and intersections between them. A conflicted past haunting the polarized present; old power haunting a new mind.

Male homosexuality may be the most valorous of attempts to evade the femme fatale and to defeat nature. By turning away from the Medusan mother, whether in honor or detestation of her, the male homosexual is one of the greatest forgers of absolutist western identity. But of course nature has won, as she always does, by making disease the price of promiscuous sex. (Paglia 15)

When I first read these words, by Paglia, my mind was at a loss for words. I had a purely kinesthetic reaction; my body overtaken by visceral images of dark alley ways, dreadful Medusan figures scouring my body, the pleasure of being penetrated, ancient women in the desert. My whole body was filled with fear, lust, uncertainty and wonder. The whole structure of my existence seemed to shatter around me. These words- so controversial in their attitudes towards women and gay men left me wondering how I could fit my mind back together under their pretext.

One image that was so potent, which remained with me since the beginning and subconsciously drove the creation of [ABSURDUS]corpus is this:
In a cavernous dark space, a dirty warehouse covered in dust and shadows, a naked man hangs upside down suspended from an infinite ceiling. He is still, lifeless. Far beneath him, four women in long dark veils are marking the ground with white paint. Creating a large symbol that fills the space underneath the man. Each woman adding her own piece to the geometry of the entire symbol. It is curved and tangled—no discernable pattern, but highly intentional—each part exact and necessary. At the entrance of the space, hanging by the entrance are ten women, completely covered in white silk—wrapped as if dead. Hanging upside down they create a path into the cavernous space, on two sides. They are singing, a low hum beneath which is an almost indiscernible chant. Harmonious voices, from gutturally low to piercingly high. This murmur fills and echoes through the entire space.

This scene filled my head from some unknown place and has vividly remained locked in my memory. It was the seed that developed the conception of this performance. Paglia’s quote became the subtext for the performance that developed into a larger, more broad commentary on gender and sexuality. This premise was explored through a specific scenario: a man had committed a crime against the Mother. He had rejected her roots, her femininity, her power—and created a world that did not acknowledge her. He had denied her for other men and now in the aftermath of his crime, She has come to judge him, she has come to seek what is Hers.

[While my work is an exploration of Paglia’s theories on gender binaries, I am very aware that her work is surrounded by a controversial conversation that contests the legitimacy of her radical views. My fascination with Paglia comes from an aesthetic, visceral and poetic fascination with the way she
writes and presents her theories. However, though this work is inspired by Paglia’s writings, they do not reflect my own personal belief on the subject. Many, including myself, consider Paglia’s work to be essentialist, dogmatic, polarized and nescient to the realities of society. Her work reflects the same binaries in society that have been constructed by the patriarchal mind and exhibit the same religious fervor of Judeo-Christian ideologies. My exploration of Sexual Personae and Paglia is not a critique of her work or Western society itself, but an exploration of her ideas and the aesthetic way in which she writes around sexuality and gender. I look at her writing as a work of art, and Paglia as a poet rather than as a theorist. By taking her words as poetry, I examined them in the same way that I examined religious iconography and texts. This allowed me to create a hyper-reality based on Paglia’s themes and construct a visceral world that exaggerated the gender binaries, religious constructs and societal structures that are intricately veiled within Western society today. Through this examination, my goal became to reveal these binaries for the audience and allow them to experience the world through Paglia’s essentialist, reductionist lens.†

† [This is my personal voice within this entire project. How the theories and concepts materialized in the actual performance of the work. Should be read as though separate from the rest of the document. (Refers to SHE as Amy, and the Veiled Ones as Jamie, Chantal, Britt or Kate)
While the performance is continuous and cyclical within this hyper-reality, there are certain thematic sections that are distinct. Each section features archetypal themes that transform and develop throughout the progression of the performance. The journey begins with *Penitence*, the self-flagellation of a man begging for mercy for some unspoken sin. He enters the world of the Mother, and disrupts the balance of the world with his presence. Then comes *Suffering*, as the man is placed upon the wooden blocks and must attempt to successfully balance on them and overcome the task. However, the impossibility of the task causes him shame of failure. Simultaneously *Gestation* is occurring as the Mother prepares a table of rituals for her daughters. She prepares for birth, death, nourishment and sanctification to initiate her children into the world. Then *Sanctification* happens as the Mother unveils her daughters and they undergo the rituals she has prepared for them. They are initiated into her Dionysian world. While they are being reborn, the Mother and Man undergo *Birthing Pain* as she reminds him of all that she has went through for him and the pain he has caused her. Then *Seduction* happens as the newly birthed women attempt to bring this man back to the fold, to reconcile him to the body of their Mother. When he refuses to return that passion is turned to *War*, as the women become Valkyrie/Siren'; a woman scorned. After attack, comes *Mourning*, for a lost brother/son/lover. But no matter the grief of loss, *Judgment* must come and the man is sentenced for his deviance from the Mother. Once complete *Death* and *Return* occur as man is returned to the womb that he has rejected. The Mother always gets what she desires.
"Somehow, SHE knows everything we have been seeing/doing. She feels all our doing. Standing beside She, I felt my roots grow deep into the Earth beneath Her feet" (Speer 3). SHE is goddess, SHE is mother, SHE is destroyer. This Woman embodies the manifestations of goddesses throughout history and cultures; She becomes the root of all men’s fear of the feminine and the Earth. SHE is darkness and mystery, chaos and rebirth; the opposite in every way of Man. SHE is the Madonna, Medusa, Kali, Mother and High Priestess.

Her mysterious procreative powers and the resemblance of her rounded breasts, belly and hips to earth’s contours put her at the center of early symbolism. Woman was an idol of belly magic, she seemed to swell and give birth by her own law. From the beginning of time woman has seemed an uncanny being. Men honored but feared her, she was the black maw that spat him forth and would devour him anew. (Paglia 8)

SHE is the essence of the Dionysian woman that Paglia identifies in Sexual Personae, the dark, wildly chaotic, earth bound mother from where life mysteriously explodes. From the very beginning of the performance SHE stands as a gateway into the world, protecting and creating this womb within which all activity occurs. The darkness and light, the duality, that woman possess according to Nietzsche is where SHE stands (Nietzsche, Del Caro). In [ABSURDUS]corpus SHE was the guardian of her world, the nurturer of Her daughters and the destroyer of man. Her relationship to the Man and to the male audience was one of hostility, but also care. SHE is their mother and longs for them to return, but knows the crimes they have committed against her and brings Her full fury against them. They cannot gaze on Her in the same way as the women because SHE possesses everything they are not.

[The performance of her movement was highly directional and polarized. Since the audience was
divided across the stage based on sex, what she showed to one side of the audience did not get shown to the other. In the process we developed two sets of movement vocabulary and performative qualities that were dependent on who could see her at the moment. Her movement towards the women was one of sanctifying and honor, based on the timeline of the menstruation cycle. While towards the men Her movement was based on the act of being penetrated and ripped open, and manifested itself as anger and accusation.

SHE is Medusa, the ancient goddess that is charged with power and sensuality. Her figure has appeared in religions and cultures all over the world and throughout history. SHE is Neith of Egypt, Athene of North Africa, serpent goddess of the Amazons, Kali of the Vedic’s—SHE is the mother of all gods. SHE turns men to stone because Her veins course with menstrual blood, which no man can gaze on. In Greek mythology SHE is portrayed as a horrible monster that destroys men; because they could not gaze on Her they objectify Her, SHE was turned into the gorgon SHE is known as in popular culture. The Dionysian woman is turned into monster, witch, and myth by Apollonian men who do not understand Her and who are frightened by Her power. There is an active myth creating of the past and realities that are not aligned to the male view of the world. In fairy tale the old woman in the woods becomes the witch that will destroy you, the mystic deer woman in Native culture into a seductress, the Mother goddess into gorgon that turns men to stone. The Apollonian mind seeks to define and structure all things, reducing the world to mathematical equations that explain the unknown. By turning nature into a quantifiable reality, man can ignore the dark chthonic chaos that lies beneath the surface and continue living in their safe structured world. The objectification of that which is unknown to man is the only way he can exist alongside the mystery of it. As Stevie Nicks wrote:
The world teaches you that the way you (women) exist in it is disgusting — you watch boys cringe backward in your dorm room when you talk about your period, blue water pretending to be blood in a maxi pad commercial. It is little things, and it is constant. After you go to the gynecologist for the first time, you and your friend talk about how much it hurts, and you watch boys your age turn to look at you and wrinkle their noses: the reality of your life is impolite to talk about. The world says that you don’t have a right to the space you occupy, any place with men in it is not yours, you and your body exist only as far as what men want to do with it. (Nicks, emphasis my own)

SHE is a goddess of the old world, the dreams of men longing for their mothers womb in times of terror. There is a mythological prehistory that tells the tale that is the basis for Paglia’s work and the impetus for creating my own work. This history records a time when women were at the center of social and religious ideology. Because of Her mystery and unknown procreative powers, woman was held in esteem and reverence. Despite the archeological evidence, there is a debate as to the legitimacy of these claims of Neolithic times. A debate as to whether these matriarchal theories are historic or merely the idealistic conjectures of feminists looking for hope amid the monotony of patriarchy. However, in the midst of this debate about the legitimacy of these theories, the very root of patriarchy lies. This root is the Apollonian mind that has dismissed the idea of the Dionysian woman and confined Her to the kitchen and motherhood for the past millennia. Women are allowed to exist only within the structure that man has provided, and any step beyond this boundary carries the taint of abnormality and a penalty. In my work the very root of The Mother’s anger lies in this confinement and the debate on Her legitimacy.
Gloria Steinem, noted feminist and theorist, chronicles this history after the discovery of artifacts on the Isle of Crete that led some archaeologists to investigate the possibility of matriarchal societies in the Neolithic age and question the assertion of Western historians that Patriarchy is the only known social structure.

Once upon a time, the many cultures of this world were all part of the gynocratic age. Paternity had not yet been discovered, and it was thought ... that women bore fruit like trees—when they were ripe. Childbirth was mysterious. It was vital. And it was envied. Women were worshipped because of it, were considered superior because of it.... Men were on the periphery—an interchangeable body of workers for, and worshippers of, the female center, the principle of life. (Steinem 4-5)

As the incubator of life, the process of childbirth is magical as it unfolds almost invisibly before the eye. Before modern technology there was no way to understand what occurred within the womb or how a child came forth from their mother. This mystery was revered in Minoan culture, women were the regenerators of human life and men recognized the power of that process. Birth required a woman and her womb; a man’s part was simple and fleeting.

The discovery of paternity, of sexual cause and childbirth effect, was as cataclysmic for society as, say, the discovery of fire or the shattering of the atom. Gradually, the idea of male ownership of children took hold.... (Steinem 5)

At the decline of Minoan matriarchy came the institute of ownership. Man desiring to leave a mark on the world, to lay claim to something he could call his own. The seed he planted became important; a man’s seed became his projection into the
future—his own possibility for rebirth. A reversal occurred in the perspective of who had claim to life and where it came from.

Gynocracy also suffered from the periodic invasions of nomadic tribes.... The conflict between the hunters and the growers was really the conflict between male-dominated and female-dominated cultures.... women gradually lost their freedom, mystery, and superior position. For five thousand years or more, the gynocratic age had flowered in peace and productivity. Slowly, in varying stages and in different parts of the world, the social order was painfully reversed. Women became the underclass, marked by their visible differences. (Steinem 5)

When the focus of society turned from agriculture to hunting and accumulation of possession the reverence for the womb was lost. Women became a weakness to nomadic fighters, especially a pregnant woman. The power woman held in society was taken from them as they were subjugated to the household. The ideals in society were beginning to shift from life and earth based to the sky and constructs of man.

Referring to patriarchy does not refer the polar opposite of matriarchy, because they lie within different spheres of context. Matriarchal societies focused on the earth and womb, the sexuality and body of the woman were revered because of their mysterious nature. It is a worship of the female body. At the center of matriarchy lies a focus on life, death and rebirth. Patriarchy is concerned with man’s efforts to organize and mold the world into a reflection of himself. It is not concerned with the body but the mind, and how man can will himself to exist in this world.

Amy’s movement was half improvisational and half set movement. The improvised scores were based on cycles and process of gestation and
menstruation. Starting from the early signs of beginning the menstruation period, through the bleeding and cramps, through the unfertilized egg dropping out until the body is purged. From life to death back to life. Her arms moving in snake like patterns originating from her pelvis. The movement, the improvisation and choreography originated from the pelvis, Her seat of power, contracting and thrusting.)

When archeologists discovered buildings, pottery, murals, and decorative arts that were so ornate and contrary to the majority of artifacts found in other cultures following Minoan culture it led some theorists to wonder what power women held in this society and the their role as leaders. According to international author and mediator Craig Barnes, images of lilies, dolphins, beautiful women in high places all could possibly lead to the conclusion that women and their sexuality held a high place of power in Minoan society (Barnes 53). Priestesses and women gave and took life—birth was sacred and gave women a place of reverence in society. As the people who could give life and take it away, women were in charge of the social, political and religious structure (Barnes 52). According to Barnes, the Indo-European cultures that existed before the Abrahamic tribes were based on Matriarchal lineage and structure where women created the rules and men seemed no more than drones that worked and provided for women (Barnes 55). This theory has been controversial since it’s beginnings due to the fact that there is very little evidence beyond conjecture to support it. Largely supported by many feminist thinkers, the idea of a female driven society before the establishment of patriarchy is said to be merely a romantic idea that would support many claims for women’s right and liberation (Eller 9). Critics state that it is only the wishful thinking of feminists who long for a past where women were powerful.
Relying on the matriarchal myth in the face of evidence that challenges its veracity leave feminists open to charges of vacuousness and irrelevance that we cannot afford to court. And the gendered stereotypes upon which the matriarchal myth rests persistently works to flatten out differences among women; to exaggerate differences between man and women; and to hand women an identity that is symbolic, timeless, and archetypal instead of giving them the freedom to craft their own identities. (Eller 8)

However controversial matriarchal societies are, within the myths themselves lies a powerful analogy for feminine power and strength. “Here was a myth that wielded tremendous psychological and spiritual transformative power” (Eller 5). This idea of women who were powerful and connected to the earth, then overthrown by the analytic power of men created within society a past that haunts our ideas of modern society and patriarchy today. While there is archeological evidence of matriarchy in Minoan society there is little to base these ideas on other than conjecture and additive reasoning.

However this same idea can be seen in more recent societies such as the Iroquois tribes in North Eastern America where councils of women were the only ones in the tribe who decided to put someone to death or go to war, because they created life they were the only ones who could take it away. Historically more recent these Native American tribes, where matriarchal lineage and female social power existed, have histories and myths are much easier to address and digest.

In the beginning was the Spider: SHE divided the world. SHE made it. Thinking thus SHE made the world. SHE drew lines that crossed each other: thus were the directions. Thus were the powers. Thus were the quadrants. Thus were the solstices. Thus were the seasons. Thus was Woman. (Anderson 3)
Woman; the giver and destroyer of life. In many cultures there exists this idea of the duality of the female body and psyche. Native cultures have traced their lineages through the maternal line, believing that the womb was where life was conceived and where a person came from. It was the only thing one could be certain of- their mother.

[The relationship of the Mother and the Man in the performance was based on an exploration of pregnancy and birth. The care and gently nurturing of a mother to a newborn child, the pain and physical anguish of pushing a child out of the vagina, the desire to protect, the heartbreak of a child leaving. Amy and I set up a relationship between us that oscillated between gentle movements as she enveloped me in her embrace, to pushing and lashing out in anger. Throughout it all I was subject to her will and direction, occasionally finding moments of agency and free will, but in the end Amy always came back to direct my body how she desired.]

Beauty, danger, mystery and power- SHE is everything that constitutes the natural world. SHE is epically beautiful, complex and mysterious, destructive (especially to man made structures and systems), nurturing and life giving, cyclic and never ending. The world of [ABSURDUS]corpus is the world of SHE, it is Her reality, Her womb where She determines life and death of man. Protector and ruler of this reality, SHE divides and dictates the rituals of this world, SHE dictates the flow of life and death; SHE is the Mother Goddess.

[Though the score and timeline of the performance was set, the dancers had freedom to make choices about timing and execution of the movement—which changed drastically each night based on the audience and how deeply we were in the world of the performance. There was a moment during the performance, as Amy stands]
over me moving through a score of gestation and being ripped open to give birth as I lie under her skirt contracting and trying to pull myself out, that she leans down and caresses my face in a moment of love before she returns to her violent score. On the last night of the performance as she caressed my face she whispered “I loved you once” and then shoved my face down into the floor. This improvised moment turned into the most poignant moment of the entire night—the embodiment of our characters had fully enveloped us and we all believed the reality we had created.

Rejection of SHE has lead to Her anger; for no Mother desires to have Her children reject Her. To reject the place that gave one life and nurtured their existence is to reject the structure of life itself. Paglia wrote, “It is against the earth Mother that men have erected their towering edifices of politics and sky-cult. But Mother’s can be fatal to their sons, for she is Medusa” (Paglia 14).

While SHE is the essence of the Dionysian spirit, goddess of the earth cult, SHE embodies ritual and rites. Appropriated from some Western religious rituals, a sky cult following, they are Hers to dictate. The majority of rituals within the Western religious structure were appropriated themselves from the cults of conquered tribes that were followers of the Dionysian rites and goddess culture. Thus by reclaiming them for herself, SHE was asserting Her power over the imposed structure of Man, reminding Man of the ineffectiveness of His power over Her. As Man creates laws and structure to govern the Mother, a mere whim of the Mother leaves His efforts in ruin. As Lucretius said, “The universal Mother is also the common grave” (Paglia 43). Earthquake, tsunami, volcano—no matter how much Man attempts to lay his claim to this earth, the Mother just laughs and allows Her cycles to show their power. Whatever rituals and claims Man may make, the Mother will always take what SHE has made, has given birth to. It is not a malicious destruction, rather it is Her nature, neither good
nor bad—which is a sky cult constructed dichotomy. Life and death, destruction and birth exist as the cycles of life that cannot be placed with the moral codes of Western structure. Paglia describes Her as "morally ambivalent, violent as well as benevolent. The sanitized pacifist goddess of feminism is wishful thinking" (43). The Earth Mother predates societal structures; SHE has existed before the conception of humanity and will continue to exist long after Man has disappeared.
**MAN**


*Singular syllable- alone.*

*HIM against the world- alone.*

*Standing judgment, victory, pain, love, success, the world- Alone.*

*Only one- His journey is his own, a singular projection into a linear future.*

*He is alone.*

According to Paglia, the homosexual male is the ultimate rejection of the Dionysian Mother; he is the predominant instigator of Absolutist Western Identity. Paglia states that culture, society, Apollonian structure has long been purported by homosexual males in society from the time of the ancient Greeks. A separation from the chaotic darkness of Nature allows the homosexual male to create the linear structure in society that is purely Apollonian. However, in this a Man is alone, he is a singular projection into the future. Man is the embodiment of the phallus, a linear, external genital that must energetically exercise its self to achieve its goal.

Genitally, he is condemned to perpetual pattern of linearity, focus, aim, and directness. An erection is a thought and the orgasm an act of imagination. The male has to will his sexual authority before woman who is a shadow of his mother and all women. Failure and humiliation constantly wait on the wings. No woman has to prove herself a woman in the grim way a man has to prove himself a man. (Paglia 20)

Task and suffering, the destiny of every Man- to be masculine is to adopt this phallic approach to life. According to Paglia “In sex as in life men are driven beyond—beyond the self, beyond the body. The male genital metaphor is concentration and projection” (Paglia 19). A
Man is linear, end-gaming; He has a direction and point of success. The main insult the Dionysian suffers against Man is that he has disrupted the balance between the two of them. In His quest for control and structure, He has sought to suppress the Mother and define Her indefinable nature. The erection of cities, creation of scientific laws, the hierarchy of beauty and suppression of the Matriarch are all components of the Apollonian man striving to create his mark and climax in his existence. Climax is the ultimate goal of Man, in life and sexual endeavors; He must work and exert himself in order to achieve his goal. Opposite of the Female circularity and non-doing, He strives and fights for His place in the world. “A Large part of our (man’s) excessive manifestations come from a terror that if we are not signaling all the time that we exist, we will in fact no longer be there” (Kustow 256).

Throughout the performance, Man is constantly creating lines, performing tasks and working towards the ending—however constantly failing and has to restart. For a Man to fail in His task is the ultimate shame—a demasculinaization, a flaccid genital—Man must constantly prove himself to the world to exist in it as Man.

[For about a quarter of the performance I am positioned on top of 8 wooden blocks, in a spread eagle plank position. Amy sets me here, with the blocks under my hands and feet, in the corner of the space that the men are sitting. Surrounded by other men, I made the task of having to balance on the blocks for the entire 15 minutes. Impossible task. Each time I fall, either from losing my balance or exhaustion, I have to reset the blocks and restart. I do not look at the men; there is too much shame in not being able to complete this feat of strength. This was my task, my crucifixion, and my attempt to have control of my life—which I inevitably fail at.]
This reflects the King of the Rock mentality that Robert Jensen, a male feminist activist, discusses in his work. “Not everyone can win. In fact by its very definition there is only one real man at any given moment. In a system based on hierarchy there can be only one man at the top” (Jensen 27). According to Jensen, in our Western hierarchical structure, our concept of masculinity creates an environment where men are in constant struggle for dominance (Jensen 28). You either are the King or you are subordinate to the King—who cannot feel any sort of comfort at being on top because he must continually fight to keep his position from those below him. The Man must constantly prove himself, even in his penitent state; He must will himself into being, to exist as a Man. This reality has become the standard for masculinity in Western society, it is normal for men to struggle with each other and project these images of isolation. Failure to adhere to this construct results in be categorized as non-masculine, or feminine (Jensen 32). Which is the worst insult a Western man can receive. These strict codes of masculinity constrict the activity of men and place strict penalties on those who fall outside of normalcy. Unnoticed in society these constructs of masculinity are invisible to mainstream culture, we accept them as always having existed. When in fact they have been layered onto our way of thinking for millennia; ever since the biological difference between men and women allowed man to take a dominant position in his society—the indoctrination began.

[My movement oscillates between ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ qualities. Masculine defines as thrusting, linear and upward directed movement; while feminine became defines as circular, sensual movement of the pelvis and sequential gestures that could be described as flamboyant. My movement was also highly directional, one quality when I faced the women and another as I faced the men. Perception of my body and movement was central to how I created and performed the movement.]
There is a dichotomy that exists within the bodies of gay men and within the homosexual community that Paglia seems to gloss over in her conjectures. There is a rejection of the female body as an object of desire, however there is also an embracing of many things considered feminine by society. One is purely biological; the other is societal. Feminine and masculine are constructed identities, embodied and solidified by our society—but they themselves are false images. However, they do exist and in Western society today there is an observable amount of acceptance and embodiment of the feminine within the homosexual community. In mannerisms, dress, speech and affinities—there is an alignment or rejection of qualities considered feminine by hetero-normative society.

Propensities towards the expression of masculinity and femininity exist within the same body of a gay male, either by choice or biology. Some cultures within the gay community accept and accentuate this, while others reject it to embody one or the other. Some reject the feminine completely out of fear or desire to prove themselves, others reject the masculine in order to further remove themselves from the norm. In either case, there is recognition of these two gendered propensities and a desire to make a statement about them by living within a certain context. In each community, however, as they attempt to approach this subject there is a concurrent subversive effort to create a sense of normalcy. To be like or accepted by the majority of society in some manner. This is done either by attempting to overtly conform into mainstream culture, or Pass' as a straight man. Such as the Bear culture that developed out of San Francisco, this community attempts to project an idea of rugged masculinity through their bodies, activities and mannerisms (Hennen 109). Alternatively by attempting to alter societal impressions of gay communities to bring the two cultures more in alignment. An example of this attempt to alter societal impressions is the Radical Faeries, a counter culture movement; they seek to subvert hetero-normative standards of gender and at the same time redefine queer culture through a spiritual lens (Hennen 63). In all these sub-cultures there is a desire for normalcy,
to fit into a society that has rejected them—either personally or communally—and refused them a legitimate place at the table. In a grotesque way, it is a longing to return to the place that all men desire to return to, the warm embrace of their Mother. Thus Paglia overlooks the personal and societal consequences of her words, rejection of the feminine is not the end of the game—sometimes the son wants to return.

[I created a diagonal across the space from the men’s corner, where my blocks resided, and Amy’s table on the women’s side. Along this trajectory I navigated throughout the performance—back and forth, between longing and repulsion. This was most evident in the trio between Jamie, Chantal and myself—our improvised score was based on seeing one another’s bodies and pulling/pushing along this diagonal. They attempted to seduce me into coming close to the table, and then pulled me away back towards the men. This relationship of seduction and repulsion was performed on all our parts as we embodied the polarized space and expectations of our sexuality.]

This is the dilemma of the Man in [ABSURDUS]corpus, he is both the theoretical gay man of Paglia— the ultimate rejection of the Mother— and He is the gay man of Western society— the rejected outcast of Apollonian society. He rejects the Mother, insults the life she gave Him, and turns to other men. However, in the performance is depicted His desire to return to her, His fascination with the Table that gives life. The space is set up on a polarized diagonal and the Man moves on this line throughout the performance— oscillating between rejection and desire. He is constantly attracted and repulsed by the table and what it has to offer him. For to accept the Mother would be to deny who He is and where He is going; but to reject it is to succumb to the Mother’s anger and punishment. This dichotomy, this oppositional war within the gay male is perhaps what drives him to
create and drive society forward, as Paglia claims he does (Paglia 22). But this binary is also evident when observing the gay male body. According to photographer Fred Day,

In close proximity to eroticism associated with homosocial bonding and homosexuality, these pictures were infused with desire and anxiety, repulsion and attraction … Day’s gay male nudes possess the aesthetic trappings of refined art and high culture (Apollonian) … but also contain a frisson of impending sexual release and bodily pleasure (Dionysian), to say nothing of their sado-erotic inflection and paedophilic associations. (Crump 11, emphasis my own)

The images associated with two male bodies evoke a wildness and sexuality that is primarily Dionysian, while still maintaining the linearity of the Male body.

[The opening image of the show was the initial start for conceptualizing my character in the performance. Hanging upside down, in the middle of the space with a single spot light illuminating me. My face veiled with white lace. As I hang I whip myself with a feather boa that has leather woven into it. This continues for as long as the audience is entering the space and finding their seats. It takes about 20 minutes. The entire time I am facing and watching the women enter, watching the table; ignoring the men. When I feel the need to relieve my brain from the blood flow, I pull myself up for a moment—staring into the light above me. When I am relieved, I allow myself to drop back down to continue the whipping. By the final night my back was covered in bruises and cuts. I was attempting to subjugate my body to nothing more than sensation and non-thinking; to feel the physicality of the pain and find the pleasure]
within the punishment. I never achieved it during that experience, but I believe I was on the verge of finding it.]

Pain and pleasure have been commonly been associated together throughout history. The BDSM (Bondage, Discipline and Sadomasochism) and Leather culture have been refining these techniques to combine pleasure and pain for years. Followers and acolytes of various religions use painful experiences to provoke ecstatic spiritual pleasure—to bring them closer to god, whether that is spiritual or sexual. Whipping, a common act in the Leather community, is used to create a sensation of both pain and pleasure. As James Miller wrote about Michel Foucault writings,

In the orgies of torture, trembling with the most exquisite agonies, exploding the limits of consciousness, letting real, corporeal pain insensibly melt into pleasure...it seemed possible to breach, however briefly, the boundaries separating the conscious and unconscious, reason and unreason, pleasure and pain—and, at the ultimate limit, life and death. Complete totally pleasure is related to death, and thus pain. (Miller 37)

Serving also as a ritual, acolytes of the Catholic Church before the 13th century and still currently other religious traditions use flagellation and pain as a form of purging and penitence. Banned in the Catholic Church in the 13th century, as an act that was deemed as cruel—perhaps they did not see the correlation between devotion and pain (Abbott). It was an act of suffering that allowed the follower to feel as though they have paid for their sins, that they had suffered in the same manner as their god in order to step closer to them. Lewis Farnell, classical scholar at Oxford University, says, “whipping (in ritual) was meant to drive out from the body impure influences or spirits, so that is may become the purer vehicle of divine force. Blows are archaic magic, punishing marks of election” (Paglia 44). An obedient Slave in the Leather community will always follow his Master,
as long as the Master follows the rules. Pain and pleasure are one of
the strongest combinations in loyalty and obedience. As He whips
himself, He watches the table, the women- in an attempt to purge
himself of his sins against the Mother. Ironic whipping as He
punishes himself with a tool of flamboyance, associated with the drag
world. This is both mocking and literal. He punishes himself with a
symbol that is the essence of why He is punishing himself, a sadistic
act to punish the corporeal body that has rejected normalcy. But to
beat oneself with an object that is flamboyant and queer is to mock
the punisher, to accentuate the rejection. By punishing himself with a
tool of his community, is he acknowledging fealty to the Mother or to
His brothers?

The Great Mother’s main disciple is her son and lover, the
dying god. They are loved, slain, buried, and bewailed by
her, and are then reborn through her. Maleness is merely a
shadow whirled round in natures eternal cycle. The boy gods
are phallic consorts of the Great Mother, drones serving the
queen bee, and are killed off as soon as they have performed
their duty of fecundation. (Paglia 52)

For the son is born from his Mother’s vastness, from her reality;
he is bound to her for his entire life. He returns to her breasts for
nourishment, to her body for gratification, her womb for reproduction;
men are the greatest worshippers of the Mother. While Paglia asserts
that gay men are the ultimate rejection of the Mother, there is an
aspect she ignores of the embracing of the feminine/Dionysian within
the homosexual community. This is all defined of course within the
gender binary that Western society is based upon. While rejecting the
female body, the homosexual community has embraced certain aspects of
what is considered feminine. Whether it is gesture, speech, dress or
lifestyle the transformation of the aspects into the male body has
created a new culture that is recognizable to the modern world. The
extreme of this can be found in drag culture. A queer man puts on the
façade of a woman, but not in a realistic way- for everyone knows she
is in drag— but in a way that creates an alternate reality of gender and sexuality. By masquerading as a woman, this man is putting on or becoming everything that he has rejected. This practice of drag—a man putting on the garb and attributes of a woman—can be seen in ritual and myth throughout history. In most spiritual structures the devotee seeks to imitate and become one with his god or goddess. According to Paglia “spiritual enlightenment produces feminization of the male” (Paglia 45). Shamanic tribes have practiced the position of the cross dressing holy man for centuries, to them “the shaman is a archaic prototype of the artist who also crosses sexes and commands space and time” (Paglia 45). Native cultures have been known to call queer men and women “Two-Spirited”, possessing two souls, a male and female part. They were considered sacred, spiritual beings that held knowledge of the gateways between the physical and spiritual world. The two-spirited shaman “adopts female speech, hair style and clothing, and finally takes a husband” (Frazer, 255-57). Many cultures throughout geography and history have held the gay man to be more spiritually in tune with nature and the non-physical world (Paglia 44). They are more connected with the Mother and the earth-cult she presides over. Thus perhaps the drag queen is the modern shaman, connected to the earth in a way we have forgotten. Or perhaps they fall more inline with Paglia’s initial view of the Apollonian homosexual and the drag queen is an exaggerated caricature of woman—far from nature—merely a mocking of what they have rejected.

[I wish I had explored this more in a structural way; I did it in a physical and aesthetic notion with my movement and costuming, however I desire to explore this embodiment of the women thematically more. Whether that is with another man in the production or more exploration of drag as performance, I am unsure. This concept that I developed was never fully realized in the performance.]
The worship of the female form and Dionysus can be seen in the gay community with the cult-like obsession with pop star sensations. Madonna, Cher, Lady Gaga, Marylyn Monroe; these are beautiful women who present themselves as strong, sensual beings and have been idolized among many gay communities in the US. This fascination with the powerful female figure and their message is a way in which gay men still are the “main disciples” of the Dionysian mother.

Because of their initial rejection, there is something vital in these pop idol’s lyrics and lives that fulfill a longing gay men. Richard Dyer, British film scholar, points to a “combination of strength and suffering” in many female divas that appeals to gay men (Halperin 405). These pop icons have found new ways to describe the gay experience and give words to the unspeakable longing within the gay community to belong (Halperin 409). David Halperin, LGBTQ pioneer, writes about how Hollywood divas “incarnate different combinations of strength and suffering, glamour and abjection, power and vulnerability” (Halperin 408). These emotions that gay men in Western society have felt or desired manifest in the strong female star. Perhaps this emotive connection is the reason for this obsession, or perhaps this idolization of women exists because he has rejected the Mother in other aspects of his life. Perhaps he cannot escape the inevitable role as Disciple of the Mother Goddess. This inevitability that [ABSURDUS]corpus interacts with, this “Born this way” concept that the 20th century gay community has become obsessed with, creates the polarity that this work exists within and questions at the same time. These obsessions and roles, longings and rejections, choice and nature, they are the very root of the questions explored in this work and greater society as a whole.

[The final image of the performance, I am being carried, as if by pallbearers, by the women to the men’s corner and passed up to the creatures that have descended from the fabric sculpture that hangs there. The beings in the sculpture have been descending]
slowly throughout the performance and in the end they take hold of my and pull me up into their bodies. It is a reverse birth, being pulled back into the womb. The lights fade as I disappear into their embrace. It was metaphorical in nature, having several meanings that were never explicitly stated for the audience—allowing them to create their own narrative of the ending. I had trouble creating an ending for the work; I thought that it needed some final note to leave the audience with. However, in the end I realized I existed within the tyranny of climax, the tyranny of the Apollonian mind. There was no need for resolution, climax, ending; it could just keep going. The end was just a comma in the sentence.

In the end [ABSURDUS]corpus, He ascends—into death? Acceptance? Release from suffering? Does the suffering continue? The story never ends; it is a cycle within this womb that SHE created. And Man is not cyclical; He does not exist in cycles, thus he does not belong in this world. In the end, no matter his choice, the Mother/Nature/Woman will always win and exist beyond him. For a man the future is uncertain, he must forge a path for himself and constantly make himself anew. To be returned to the womb, a reverse birthing, is perhaps another chance for Him to redeem himself, to start his journey anew; or perhaps it is a return to the beginning, never fulfilling his path—caught forever in a cyclic world. There was no climax, no final statement, and no resolution. Anti-climax and end point, anti-masculine throughout.
The Veiled Ones

SHE is Djinn'

SHE is Dryad'

SHE is Hamadryad'

SHE is in love all over, kissing with the giant in the small.

Within the eyes where the Dryads are fucking, in the dreams of the butterflies our children are only made up of light.

These Spirits, these Sisters, Daughters of the Mother; [ABSURDUS] corpus includes four women that represent these beings. They usher the women into the space, performing rituals and rites with each participant, preparing them for entry into their Mother’s womb—the performance space. Daughters and extensions of their Mother’s will, they are the radiant Sirens’ that seduce men to their deaths. They are the voices of women throughout the ages—cries of pain, pleasure, slavery and seduction. They are the collective Woman that has suffered in childbirth, menstruation, rejection, love and rape. They are the well that haunts the women of the present and binds them together.

This is a reminder of the grandness of the woman’s soul, and how individuals create it, we pour so much of ourselves, our emotions, experience into this collective well that feeds us. I sometimes feel without self, there are moments of some sort of blindness, revelry, vulnerability, out of control— but in perfect order. Spinning; the world is so big and I am so small— both significant and insignificant. (Ford 1)

[Spinning became an important component of our rehearsal process and warm up. Trance educing movement is used by many cultures to achieve altered states of reality. The Dervishes of]
Turkey, Yoruba Orisha worship, and Southern Baptist revivals all rely on repetitive movement to create trances. I used to practice in my own rehearsal to clear the head and focus on the task, and in the performance to create a trance unity on the stage filled with whirling bodies. It is a beautiful feeling to spin so much you lose self-awareness, verticality and perception of reality—to expand yourself into everything around you.

Women are not singular, as man is, they are collective—a community that is bound by blood. These women are Woman—embodiments of the sexuality, chaotic, sensual community that brings life to this earth. Entering veiled, they are one; a singular force that rises up from the earth, a whirlwind that redefines the space. They are unbridled women, released from the patriarchal structure of Man, allowed to just be, to Exist as they are. Removed from stereotype, from the Male gaze; they are all that is Woman.

Before I was unveiled felt like I was coming out of the earth, the heavy dirt and earth like a blanket weighing me down and fingers reaching through the layers to touch the air. Touching the breasts feels more genuine, touching the nipples, moving the breasts with the brush of a hand feels freeing and feminine to the breasts go and fly. Touching you (Man) I felt violated and livid to having you a part of my world and near to our cleansing, but also sensual and turned on. (Speer 4)

The breasts have been a signifier and symbol of male desire and attraction throughout the centuries, an object that men desire from their infancy. They have become a commodity; from childbirth they provide nourishment, into adulthood where they provide fantasy and desire. A common conversation among heterosexual men dwells on the size of a woman’s breasts and how they enhance her image. Products are
developed to make breasts seem bigger, to increase their allure or sensualize them. In no other creature are the mammary glands useful beyond weaning; they serve a function in reproduction and then retreat into waiting. Man’s fascination with the breasts of a woman has led to the confinement and objectification of them. For a woman to find personal pleasure and relationship with her unconfined and unrestricted breasts takes her experience beyond patriarchal control or expectation.

[Perception of these women was everything, how they were seen by men and by women in the performance contextualized the entire work. I felt the need to create a space for them to explore and discover themselves before I could dictate anything to them. I wanted them to own the work as their own, for them to be more invested in it than I was. Because this work was about them, their lives and experiences as women, they needed to create the context for the work. Once that exploration had been undergone, I then felt that I could shape it into the thing I wanted. I created movement that was powerful, sensual, dark, loving, and ritualistic; an embodiment of their lives. Then I could help sculpt an image of women that was inline with their true beliefs about themselves and their bodies.]

The male gaze, a theory by Laura Mulvey, discusses how in media and society we observe the world through the perspective of the heterosexual male. Film and society have created a construct that bases the way we see, live and move in this world through the lens of the male eye. Since heterosexual males have dominated Western society for centuries, their perspective on the world is the most important; their judgment of the world is the most validated.

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and
passive/female. The determining male gaze projects it’s phantasy on the female figure, which is stylized accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist roles women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they could be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. (Mulvey 19)

In society and media today, the female body is a commodity that it dictated and controlled by the desires and structure of the heterosexual male. She must alter herself, consciously and constantly subconsciously, to mold herself into the desired view within this patriarchal structure. As feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey concludes in her book on the Male Gaze:

The image of woman as (passive) raw material for the (active) gaze of man takes the argument a step further into the structure of representation, adding a further layer demanded by the ideology of the patriarchal order as it is worked out in its favorite cinematic form—illusionistic narrative film. (Mulvey 25)

While film provided an ideal lens to study the way heterosexual males have objectified and illustrated the female body in society, it is a much larger phenomenon throughout Western culture; it has become a tagline for feminist arguments. However any argument fails to end the primary sexism of the gaze, because they exist within the male hetero-dominant society. The women of [ABSURDUS]corpus are free of that gaze, they are not women of this reality, and they have not been gazed upon. While men in the audience are viewing them, their movement and existence has been created and performed outside of that gaze. They are free to experience the world away from the expectations of man, and allow him to look upon them but not weigh them in his eyes.

[Arriving at this choreographic desire to create a world outside of the male gaze involved intense]
exploratory improvisation for the women to consider themselves as complete physical beings outside of a hetero-normative reality. The male gaze codifies women in how they can exist in society, predominantly in a sexual way; however, it does so through the ideals and expectations that patriarchy has developed about women throughout history—but not who they are in reality. I wanted the women to experience themselves physically, sexually and ideally as they are—at the core of their physicality. Through exploration of their physical beings and the existential nature of their bodies we developed an experiential way of thinking about their bodies and presence as women in society. Physical and sensorial research into their blood, their bones, their DNA—and from that physical exploration into abstract ideas based on their basic physicality and cycles of the body. By attempting to free their minds and bodies from the perception of man and manmade constructs, the women delved into the darkness of their souls and bodies, and emerged possessing a presence and physicality that emanated on stage. They entered a new reality and a new existence outside of the male gaze.]

In the performance SHE calls them, they come to her—drawn by their mother to Her table. SHE removes their veils, opens their eyes to her world, creating the individual out of the collective. Revealing their faces to the world, they have become Woman; more flesh than the wild sprites they emerged as. As Women, they come to the Table—to the nurturing place of their Mother. Here they purify themselves, prepare themselves for what is to come. As warriors prepare themselves for battle, priestesses to transcend; as a community they cleanse one another and support each other throughout their passage. In times past there are records of women in
communities coming together to perform rituals, separate from the larger community. Men were not allowed to participate or observe. These rituals were not for them, they were to celebrate the power and cycles that exist in the female body. Native American squaw dances, menstruation ceremonies, fertility rites, nunneries; all performed before some feminine spirit/goddess. Women of the non-Western world realized the need for their spirits to be nourished and revived, away from Man. The ironic consequences of not doing so, as Paglia says “the Apollonian line of western rationality has produced the modern aggressive woman who can think like a man and right obnoxious books—but most of western culture is a distortion of reality” (Paglia 12).

[The movement of the women is infused with religious symbology and sexuality throughout the performance. At the table they undergo four different rituals of sanctification. I created these rituals based on my experience with and love of Catholic rituals of communion and christening. First they hands and faces are washed with water, the primordial source for life. Then in an act of death they bury themselves in dirt and smear it on their faces. Once they have undergone life and death, they are sanctified on their foreheads with oil—purified of the past. And finally they are fed a slice of apple to join them together as one. It may seem out of place to use Christian based rituals for these women, however I choose to appropriate them because of the history and conflict the Christian church has had with sexuality and gender—to use them to create an ironic statement about ritual. Outside of the table, their movement reflects some of the gestures of catholic ritual—the Sign of the Cross and genuflection. These transposed rituals developed alternate meanings as the placement and context changed.]
There is a movement in Western society today to erase the binary of sex in equal opportunity acts, women’s rights and feminist movements. To make men and women the same, to have there be no difference in how the two sexes treat each other and themselves. However this plays out ethically and socially, there is still a biological difference between the male and female sex that is quite distinctive and natural. Natural does not dictate nature; some things exist as they are outside of imperialist patriarchal society, and these natural qualities are what these Veiled dancers are based on. The chemical and hormonal differences between man and woman create a different experience of the world. Within women lies a power and darkness—a biological force—that no man can ever know, a being that exists beyond the understanding of the male mind. For a woman to fully be Woman, she must embrace herself and the differences she possess from man. These are women who revel in their womanness, who are embodiments of the mysterious sensual power that lives deep within their bellies.

[It became apparent to be that the sexuality of women was a force that needed to be addressed as we discussed their life experience in rehearsal. They felt that a women’s personal sexuality and expression of it is often limited and undervalued by men and society. Through the process I began to address this by creating movement for them that expressed the sexuality we talked about, but to do it in a way that did not objectify them to the audience. Many of our discussions centered on penetration and closing off, what it meant to be broken into and the cycles of their sexual desire. What it meant for a women to be sexual in society. The pelvis is the center of power and sexuality, thus the movement became centered on the circling and thrusting of the pelvis, initiating the rest of the body to movement. Movement that was both penetrating and receptive. In the performance is]
created many uncomfortable moment for the audience, especially the men, to watch the women penetrate their mouths, feel their bodies, thrust their pelvis— to watch a woman embody and enjoy her own sexuality.

Throughout the performance their archetypal roles shift in response to the relationship between SHE and the Man. Beginning veiled they enter as extensions their Mother, moving around Her as a whirlwind and a projection of Her power. Once they are exposed they begin to respond as individuals, seducing the Man, accusing him, mourning him— each in their own unique way. Through the rehearsal process each dancer was allowed to create the emotive and performative quality they wanted to layer onto the movement. This allowed them to relay their experience as women in this world throughout the performance. Until the end, the final scene of judgment, they return to their Mother in unison and once again fold back into the amalgamous obscurity of the chthonic womb. Emerging and dissipating, cyclical throughout— these veiled dancers created the space and energy of [ABSURDUS]corpus that no man belongs in.
Insider’s Perspective- Kate Speer

Dear Nathan,

Walking still in a trance with one foot in this reality and one foot still planted in that other world, I felt you deserved a longer love letter, or I just needed to figure out what happened.

The honesty on the first day of rehearsal...the admission of the location of power you held as a male choreographer creating a piece exploring female/femaleness. I think this work truly came to life because of the committed cast. I had no idea how soft spoken you really are until I began this journey with you. Your aura and presence speaks volumes so to have to lean in to hear your thoughts, strain to hear your directions or those silent rehearsals where we just slowly built a phrase- perhaps that’s what drew us in more. To be able to hear you, we had to quiet ourselves and it let us all connect at a deeper level.

I am so appreciative of the layers you gave us to work with. No idea can be fully understood until it is tried. The movement is so delicious to do, I miss that I won’t move through each phrase-all a favorite and necessity to my transformation. While the muscles and movement were hyper specific, the emotional trajectory was also given to us, the dancer- to discover and embody. Deep down that is so satisfying to discover your own spirit in the midst of articulate movement. I think the intense emotions were so integrated with the movement because of your specificity during the process rather than placed superficially. This discovery of my being inside your movement became mine, thus investing me in the piece.

I’m also thankful that your vision was complete and strong to let us know exactly what this world of yours was. We needed to see what kind of Woman you were imagining. The photos, text; the video of the dirt covered female grabbing the raw, scraggly brush helped us to understand your vision and elicit from your mind and movement something fitting for your world.
I am honored and amazing to have led our centering ritual. Honored to be given that responsibility by the cast and to give you the opportunity to step down from leadership to enter your own imagination and embody your character. I’m amazed that could happen, a dancer leading the ensemble into the imagination of someone else, it speaks to how you taught us. Finally I am struck by wanting to reenter the world. I imagine that the work appears dark, erotic and sexual—and while those things are embodied in the work, my journey has many more layers, so yes running through is emotionally, spiritually and physically exhausting, but it reenergized me as well. The transformation is alivening. Unbelievable how many emotions and how real their manifestations are. Thank you.

This cannot be the end, only the beginning of many more worlds.

Love, Kate
Process of Conception

The rehearsal process for [ABSURDUS]corpus involved deep exploration into various forms of research, movement, artwork and personal experience. This work all arose from a theoretical basis, however it manifested itself through a variety of forms that all added layers of meaning and content. The process of compiling and creating a living embodied reality was what we explored during our rehearsal.

The entire process was a conversation between the dancers and myself. As I was working with a cast of women I did not want to fall into the patriarchal trap of dictating their experience and their bodies. I began the first day of rehearsal by admitting that I was a man and had no knowledge of their bodies and asked them to always tell me if I was stepping out of line. As a man creating a work about the female body and experience, I had no right to dictate anything to these women about their bodies- this was always on the forefront of my mind as I created. My primary goal as the choreographer was to keep my dancers safe and not objectify them. Every decision I made was filtered through them and we discussed the reasons behind each choice. The dancers had their own agency throughout the process to make choices and to voice their thoughts, discomforts and experiences. While the movement was not made in collaboration with the dancers, it was created in a way that was informed by them. I made myself very aware of each choice I made and how it could potentially affect them, and how to best serve their interest in the work. We began each process by discussing the images and inspirations I had found and I made myself open to knowing their thoughts and experiences of the work. I made myself very aware of the thoughts and words that I used to ask my dancers to do things. In the beginning I found myself thinking of ‘allowing’ them to react a certain way. But then I realized this was all apart of the patriarchal structure, I thought that as a man I was the one to allow the women to do things. I had to re-pattern my beliefs and thoughts to acknowledge this structure and allow myself to
come along side them in this journey and not merely conducting the journey.

**Imagery**

We began the process with imagery and theory, at the beginning of rehearsal seeing, watching and discussing the inspiration. I found that I had a very different reaction to the imagery than the cast, and this informed how I began to see the material I was working with. I believe I created a quiet space where the dancers could reflect, dig into themselves and voice their thoughts—without rushing or minimizing anything. The aesthetic structure we created began because of this process and allowed us to unite around the concept of the piece.

Photographs and films created a large part of the inspiration and process for creating the images and scores for improvisation. (See images on pages 7-15) Fashion photography and images of the human form provided me with the thematic and aesthetic inspiration that I based the costumes and characters on. Alexander McQueen, the fashion designer, played a large part in the aesthetics of [ABSURDUS]corpus. I resonated with him as a gay man who was interested and inspired by the female form. The cast and I spent parts of our rehearsals examining these images and discussing their relation to our own experience and bodies. As a world that deals in the human form, the high fashion world is highly dictated by social structures and codes. However they are also an industry that rebels and redefines cultural definitions of the body and gender. This process creates innovative and controversial images that were in line with the work I was creating. Volkan Ergen, a Turkish film artist, provided work in film that inspired the scores for improvisation and an aesthetic for the character of SHE. By using other modes of expression the world of [ABSURDUS]corpus developed a refined aesthetic that rebelled against the cliché of the dance world. By making it about the world and not the movement, the entire world of [ABSURDUS]corpus developed into a more complex reality.
Improvisation

Improvisation was one of the essential tools for this exploration. As a director/choreographer, improvisation is where I turn to in order to generate material, develop aesthetics, build emotional content, and perform. Much of my process in [ABSURDUS]corpus consisted of improvising and physically exploring my research until movement vocabulary and phrasing that reflected my intention developed and then piecing together the most relevant of those fragments—editing and refining the vocabulary I had developed. I used this process to create a stylized vocabulary that I could base the set choreography on, a language bank that I could draw from in rehearsal.

In rehearsal I relied on improvisation in two different ways— to embody an emotional state and to generate movement phrases. I would improvise in rehearsal as my cast followed along and we built a phrase from that material. This allowed me to be in the moment and create a phrase that was filled with content. And it allowed the cast to be apart of the creation, fine tuning and interpreting the movement in their own bodies and experiences. Creating phrases in rehearsal was largely based on my repeating an improvisation until the phrase emerged as the cast followed along. Or using the movement vocabulary I had created in my personal rehearsals to construct a phrase during cast rehearsal. The emotive content developed along with the movement, finding the reason for each movement and how it was articulated through the body. Imagery and experience were used to construct how the movement was performed. On its own the movement was beautiful and metaphoric, but coupled with the latent scores added depth and richness to the movement.

Exploratory improvisation was a large part of the rehearsal process. From the very beginning at the audition for my cast to the warm-up exercises we did before each show, I used imagery of the body and physiological systems to delve deep into our experiences of the body and gender. The improvisation scores started with the blood: blood as the primacy for life, blood that connected our entire body,
blood that connected us to others. Our own experiences with blood— as a woman, as a man, as a human— all were explored.

Start to notice your heartbeat. Feel the pulse as it continuously beats, never stopping, continuous. Let your mind and body fall into synch with that pulse. Inhale. Exhale. You are just your heartbeat. Begin to notice the blood flowing through your veins. As it flows through every part of your body. All the veins and channels, connecting and continuous. Each blood cell carrying life to every cell throughout your body. Continuous, circular. Returning to the center. Each pulse of the heart, sending out. Each expansion drawing back. Out and in, birth and death.

What is it like to see your blood, for it to leave your body. Your body purging itself, ridding itself of death. Blood flowing out, life flowing out. To bleed. Your body is cyclical, you blood is cycle- ebbing and flowing with the pulses of the earth. Your body is the earth, you are the earth. Connected, responsive.

The improvisations and scores we practiced and layered onto movement centered on female sexuality and a woman’s body: her cycles, her organs, and her sexual experience. My cast and I discussed these issues deeply and personally, to allow the reality of each of their experiences to surface. Based deeply in Paglia’s writings on the Dionysian woman and her connection to the earth, we worked to unpack those words into embodied movement.

In the performance my movement is almost all improvised, based on highly specific scores and themes in each section the movement itself was expressed differently each night. This process allowed me to be in every moment, to tune myself to the audience and the cast to do the movement as it needed to be performed at that time. In order to get over my own ego and desire to ‘perform’ the movement, I set up task-
oriented structures for my self to exhaust my mind of higher thought and only move from a deep sensorial mind. The tasks, whipping myself for over half an hour as the audience came in and holding myself in a plank position upon the wooden blocks for fifteen minutes, were designed to wear down the mind and body to achieve the core of the movement. The core was established with my cast in our rehearsals where we explored and researched the concepts and scores repeatedly so that the experiential state was embedded into my unconscious. Each night was different, the energy of the audience and the cast shifted with each performance and I had to allow myself to constantly shift to fit into that energy. This allowed me to always feel the world of [ABSURDUS]corpus. In some performances I have experienced, where there is set movement there is occasionally a night where nothing feels right. Since [ABSURDUS]corpus is an experiential performance I felt the need to always be engaged and in tune with the energy of the performance.

**Collaboration**

Collaboration with other artists was another part of the process that defined the work. Collaborating with composer Nate Wheeler and film artist Kyle Monks, both proficient artists in their craft allowed me to fully realize the vision of [ABSURDUS]corpus. Working with these two men allowed me to concentrate on the work and communicate what the work needed to them, and then allow them both to create individual works of art that I could fuse with my own. In our collaborative process I relied heavily on communicating my aesthetic ideas and choices, my inspiration and my goals- and then allowed the two collaborators to work within their own process to create. I checked in frequently and gave them my feedback and thoughts on their work, and they continued to refine it to fall in line with my work. I found that the collaboration worked well in this manner. I did not want to dictate their art and their process, because that would have stifled their own creativity. However by keeping the conversations constantly going and being honest with one another allowed for the work to
develop into what I envisioned. Again, I had to be careful in the collaborative process of dictating the women’s experience. As three men creating the world for female dancers and about women’s sexuality I continued to run everything by my dancers to ensure we were all in agreement about the direction of the work.

Overall, the process of creating [ABSURDUS]corpus was a conversation that developed and expanded until it became a reality we presented onstage. From the initial inspirations, to the conversations on the body, to conversations in improvisation, to conversations in collaboration, to conversations about the work— we were constantly exploring and talking in order to fully understand the work we were creating together.

Creating the Aesthetic

While the theoretical lens and movement production for [ABSURDUS]corpus was integral to the manifestation of the reality and performance we created, there were other components that completed the concept this world. Film, audio, set design, installation and costumes were all detailed and highly intentional to make [ABSURDUS]corpus an engulfing reality. As Zoe Scofield, Seattle based artist, told me once, “you have to know the sensory quality of your work. What does it smell like? Feel like? Taste like? These are the details that will take your work to a new level.” This conversation became important to every piece of work I have created.

Initial Impression

The audience’s initial impression, their first contact with the world of [ABSURDUS]corpus, was extremely important to me. The way they came into this world, the experience and sensation of entering this alternate reality, was choreographed in a way as to set their perception for the entire performance. When they first entered the lobby of the theatre they were greeted by ushers in black dresses and veiled faces. These ushers separated the audience by their perceived sex; the men and women entered the theatre from different entrances.
The women were sent down a long hallway where the Veiled Ones met them. In this hallway each woman underwent the same rituals the Veiled Ones undergo during the performance. Hands washed, foreheads anointed with oil and apple eaten; the women in the audience had to be purified and sanctified in order to join the collective of women in the space. These rituals for the women were meant to create the sense of holiness and unity among them. To connect the female audience members to the performance and the Veiled women on the stage, to create a physical link and experience they could relate to. All the rituals were designed as sensorial experiences; the cold water on the hands, wet and clean. The smooth warm oil spread on the face, leaving a residual impression throughout the performance. The taste of apple sugar within the mouth, creating the sensation of being entered by another, having something deposited within you. These sensations set the stage for the physical and emotional sensations I hoped they would feel during the performance.

The men entered another hallway, a dark hallway with a single light at the end. In front of this light stood SHE, with another woman at her feet. As the men passed SHE watched them through her hands, judging them and observing them. The other woman hid herself beneath the Mother’s skirt, glancing up and hiding away as the men approached. This impression of darkness and being watched was to give the men the sensation of not belonging. They were entering a place that was not theirs, the men were intruding. This discomfort was the experience I wanted the men to enter the space with, to set that emotion as their first impression of the female world they were about to experience.

These installations were the first experience the audience had with [ABSURDUS]corpus, I did not want them to enter as blank canvases. I wanted to mold their experience from the moment they entered the building, and choreograph the emotional energy of the audience as they came into our world.
Costumes

The costumes were inspired by religious imagery and Victorian aesthetic, the very opposite of what the characters represented. I have always been inspired by Alexander McQueen’s designs and his desire to create powerful and beautiful women. As he said, “Rather than romanticizing female vulnerability, I want to empower women. I want people to be afraid of the women I dress” (Bowles). Fantastic costumes of feathers, silk and lace have always excited me. But the most captivating of all was the lace. There was something mysterious about lace, the revealing and covering of the underneath. Lace had religious and sacred connotations for me; sacred tables and altar clothes, veils and intimacy. I designed the Veiled One’s costumes out of all lace, to hide and reveal their bodies. To both cover and undercover the most sacred parts of their bodies. Lace head coverings, inspired by the Burkah and chador of Islamic cultures, were to hide the face and reveal it at the same time. I desired to create another perception of their bodies and faces. The Islamic influence was important to me because of the strict social structures that have developed on how the body and genders are presented. The veils provide mystery and anonymity to the dancers, they can see out into the world, but you are not allowed to see into theirs. The costumes were designed to imitate Victorian-esque styles of dress. The Victorian era was a time of sexual and female repression, where both were confined to the household and utilitarian need (FOUCAULT 3).

The Mother’s costume was designed with the same inspiration of Victorian culture and religious iconography. Inspired by Madonna and Medusan imagery from fashion photography in the 21st century. SHE wore a large full lace skirt that expanded from Her naked torso, resembling the curvature of the Earth and womb. As a queen her garb dominates the space. Her bare torso, free breast were fully visible, SHE has nothing to hide from the eyes of man. I choose to have her bare-breasted because it seemed completely natural to me, as breasts have become a commodity in society they are also a symbol of femaleness;
and SHE is the embodiment of femaleness. The hair was wild and chaotic, paying homage to Medusa’s snake covered head, and in response to covered head of the Madonna. SHE is not pure and holy, those ideals were not apart of her character; SHE was untamed and free.

The men in [ABSURDUS]corpus wore as little as possible. I originally had the intention of being naked in the performance. As I worked with the idea I realized it would only hinder and add confusion to the complex ideas already embedded in the show. So I chose Victorian-style riding pants for the men to wear, with bare torsos. There was a distinction of maleness that set us apart from the obvious femaleness of the women. However, the choice to have our faces covered in lace at the beginning of the piece was a choice to blur the lines towards androgyny. To have all our faces covered provided a unity to the group that was so obviously divided. And throughout the performance the veils were removed, furthering the distinction between the sexes.

With an air of high fashion, I aimed to move outside the boundary of what is considered conventional for dance. I desired to create a world that was completely outside of our reality, while at the same time referencing it.

The Set

The stage was divided into two parts, one half male and the other half female. I did this by seating the audience in different areas of the stage, and by organizing the actions and objects that occupied those spaces to reflect this polarization. Inspired by Christian and Islamic icons and imagery, the set pieces functioned as ritual based pieces that brought focus to different aspects of the characters.

There was a table on the women’s side of the space, a table inspired by Catholic rituals of communion or ‘last supper’. Covered in gold bowls, pitchers, and lamps—these items were representative of the tools of the Catholic priesthood and scared communion. However, they also represent tools of the household, the vessels of nourishment.
They were all chosen because of their old-world aesthetic. The bowls were filled with dirt, apples, oil and water; all these objects have a history with ritual and sacred meaning in many cultures. Water is customarily used to baptize and cleanse, oil to sanctify, dirt to bury and rebirth. The apples represented a biblical symbol of Eve’s original sin— a sin that damned the human race to death and pain. This infraction, according to the Christian tradition, is why women must suffer and agonize all their lives. To eat the apples as Holy Communion, as a community, is to own that accusation. The women take the accusation made by the men of the church and fully revel in it, to make sacred the sin of their bodies. The apples, as communion wafers represent the body of Christ, are a symbol of the fruit of the earth, the body of the Mother— prepared by her and taken as a binding of community. As the last of the rituals at the table, the apples are eaten only after cleansing and rebirth— one must be pure to come to the table of the Mother. This table is both sacred and sacrilegious. It’s in a way, an unholy communion of darkness and blood. Situated in the corner, only the women can clearly see what is happening at the table— it is for their eyes and community alone. The men can only guess and see from a distance, but not partake because of where they sit.

On the side of the space where the men sit, there are wooden blocks at the feet of the audience and a uterine sculpture above their heads. The blocks are where the Mother places the man, his task of suffering and repetition. Inspired by the crucifix of Golgotha, the wooden blocks were cut from posts and stacked upon each other. The man is spread out on top of the blocks, supporting himself in a plank position high above the ground. His task is to stay up on the blocks and if he fails, which he does, he must rearrange the blocks and reset himself in his plank. At the feet of the men in the audience he suffers, fails and restarts— in hopes of kinesthetic empathy from the men surrounding him. After he is removed from the blocks, they become the structure that serves as a portal to rebirth. This ring of wood is where the Mother inscribes symbols, rune-like characters that serve to
open a door for man to return to the womb. A man’s quest in the world is success and conquest; the blocks serve as an impossible task that he will fail at, each time becoming weaker, until he is no longer able to physically support himself.

Pragmatically the blocks served as a way to exhaust myself to the point beyond thinking. To physically drain myself so that I had to tap into something deeper in order to continue moving through the rest of the piece.

The uterine installation that floats above the heads of the men had two purposes. It consists of a cellurally slow emergence of bodies from a fabric sling. They are two androgynous beings that slowly emerge from a singular blob. The score for the installation followed the development of birth and reproduction, from sperm to womb, to birth to death. A transformation throughout the performance, they represent the pathway of life that men follow from birth to projection and attempting to achieve transcendence. The Apollonian mind created the sky-cults, philosophies based on the idea of a transcendent, omniscient deity. Beyond the reality of what is occurring onstage, these beings are in a reality of their own, a projection of the male mind. At the end, the assist in the ascendance and rebirth of man, they fold him back into their womb like reality.

Amid a world of socially constructed gender and controversial relationships between the sexes, this outside reality is a reminder of the cellular simplicity we all arise from. This installation is both spiritual and biological, reflecting a reality that is beyond the structures created by the human mind. It was my acknowledgement of the fact the world I was creating was based on artifice and miniscule in the grand scale of existence.

Film

The film, projected on the four walls surrounding the space, was created by collaborator Kyle Monks and served to enhance the atmosphere of the space and performance. It was designed to act as a
clarifier or give more detail to the abstract movement occurring onstage. Live video design in the performance provided montage, producing and layering archetypes and images that were not possible on stage or with the bodies I had. Video enabled me to create visible, physical spaces and settings out of abstract conceptual space of the theatre, and it allowed me to flesh out the characters purpose to the audience. The interweaving of film and digital video bestowed upon us a way to manipulate time in a non-linear way, opening windows to the past and future, even while the action on stage was unfolding chronologically. Close up shots of the rituals that occurred at the table, of movement, the man on the blocks—abstracted and blurred the reality of the images. They gave greater detail to the performance, but at the same time the blurring and shifting of them added another element of chaos to the performance. Nothing was ever stable or exact; the shifting quality reflects the fluid nature of the subject matter of the performance. The film also included animations made from stills taken of Christian iconography and Vatican artwork. Architecture, paintings and statues of the male form and apostolic history created a religious overtone to the performance. The images served as shorthand references to Western religious institutions, without making any overt claims. The shots were distorted and close enough that it did not make any literal statements about the content, but added to textural atmosphere. An emotive atmosphere was derived from images of suffering and cold lines.

Music

The sound scape for [ABSURDUS]corpus was created in collaboration with Nate Wheeler, a Brooklyn-based composer. Nate and I had many conversations about the theories and ideas that were the impetus for the performance and how that was produced in sound. I knew that I wanted the music to be derived from Gregorian religious chants and melodies, but I did not want the sound scape to directly point to religion. I wanted the feel of the music to have a sacred quality and somber tone, and to facilitate the audience along the emotive journey
of the piece. I knew that the sound was the piece of the performance that would seal the audience in the room, the visual and kinesthetic casting the spell. The sound had to carry the same weight as the rest of the piece, but not override it in anyway. Wheeler took the structure of Gregorian and Corsican chant, the harmonic chords progressions and melodies, and built alternative scores based on these themes. He then layered and distorted them into a complex interweaving of deep tones. While in rehearsal we used the religious chants to discover place and tone of the performance, I did not want the chants to add another layer of connotation for the audience to process amid the performance. I removed that aspect so that while the sound carried the audience along the journey with us it did not necessarily address anything specific. Like the other aspects of the performance, I desired to create a specific time and place with the references I made, however I did not want to point to a literal time and place. By abstracting components of the content I hoped to blur the line between realities.

The process of creating the music was difficult, as Wheeler lived in New York throughout the process. He and I talked extensively over Skype and email about the direction of the work and where we were at in the process. We shared everything we made or had discovered. I think this constant sharing of information kept us on the same page as to the aesthetic of the work. While it was strange not having him present at rehearsals to know the piece, in the end I believe it was beneficial that he was removed until the end. He came in fully understanding the work but also detached enough to see it with a clear, objective eye. And as the world continues to expand learning to navigate long distance collaboration was very beneficial to us both.
Outsider’s Perspective—Mitchel and Ann

Nathan, I can only barely begin to sympathize and understand with the internal and external struggle that homosexuals have going on in our very sexually segregated society. The piece was magnificent! Thank you for demonstrating so well/beautifully/intensely this very intense issue that many do not even begin to consider or understand. Any passion performed well can be appreciated by even those with very little knowledge about the art! awesome. awesome. And it was an EXPERIENCE. not just a "show". I could go on for days, but I will spare you. KEEP IT UP! -Mitchel Mancura

Hi Nathan,

I surely don’t talk about any art nor have written anyone about his or hers before but this was so interesting I can’t help but talk about it.

I LOVED coming into the space with invitations that quieted myself. I felt self-deprecation with the ropes in the beginning and then duty, hardship taken on with the blocks. I saw mostly feminine figures on stage to depict the male/gay principle/energy.

I had expected to see all men.

I felt the earth from the video. The video images felt calming compared with the energy on stage at times. I saw and felt lots of frenzied energy in the running and dancing. At times energy of Medusa figure tender, other times terrifying, cruel, engulfing - drew me towards her.

After the rituals and the veils were tenderly removed, the dance felt more loving nurturing. With the veils tenderly replaced, the evil, frenzy returned.

Your last dance felt SO Beautiful - a back and forth yearning and fear/contempt/frenzy. Then she wraps you into a beautiful lace cloth
like for burial and for another world above... I kept getting Christ images, Golgotha, tomb... The music stirring, uncomfortable at times.

I felt a peace and unity at the end.

I question the portraying of the gay male energy with females rather than with males... Because I don’t know how a gay man/female is after seeing this dichotomy shown on stage.

Thank you and everyone for this amazing performance.

Ann Griffin
The Aftermath

There were many questions that came up for me after the show, through feedback I received and through performing the work. Questions about what had occurred, why I had made certain choices, confusions and responses, and the final outcome of the performance. As I prepare to reconstruct the work, these questions are on the forefront of my mind in reworking the world of [ABSURDUS]corpus. As I compare the performance with the responses I received I am trying to navigate the line between continuing to create the work I desire to create but also speak to the audience in an effective manner. With each ‘character’ in the work there were things that were effective and others that were not, and my job now is to go back and deconstruct these identities I have created and rebuild them to develop a clearer picture of the world I attempted to create.

[ABSURDUS]corpus was a living entity, a reality that came to life and subsumed us all; the performers and audience. From the beginning of the process we let go of our humanity and became these creatures, these idea, these other beings that only existed beyond this world. We set out to create a work that examined gender in society and history, and the exploration came alive and went to places we could not have imagined it would go. However, whatever the intention for the work was, I have to sit back and wonder if we actually did what we set out to do? And I have to confess—it did not. But in the end what we succeeded in doing surpassed the original intention. Instead of exploring this world and the gender constructs that exist today, we created another reality that was outside of this world. We succeeded in finding a way to explore our bodies and relationships away from the artifices of Western society and then return to manipulate them. Throughout the process we entered an alternate universe where the perception of gender and sexuality fit into natural laws rather than constructed ideals.

One caveat that must be noted in this document and exploration is that while I am examining the constructs of patriarchy in relation to
gender, matriarchy and religion through a theoretical lens I am aware that the arena of theory and criticism resides within the constructs of patriarchy and is a tool of the masculine mind. The Master’s Tools, an idea of using the tools of an ideology to deconstruct that ideology, and is a debated form of criticism in feminist conversation. However complex and unstable using the tools of dominion to examine the structure of dominion itself is, it does provide an established and clear lens for examining the constructs and allows this examination to enter an existing conversation. I do not believe I am attempting to deconstruct or critique any of these social constructs with this work, rather to examine them and play with them to create a hyper-reality where they exist in their reductionist form. I am neither re-inscribing them, nor challenging them rather presenting them and unveiling them for viewers to experience. I believe this allows the use of theory without getting caught up in trying to deconstruct the tools of dominion while at the same time deconstructing the structure of dominion with those tools. If this work were a critique or deconstruction, I would then have to navigate working within Patriarchal structures to do the work in a useful manner. However, this work is about the tools and theories, using them to create an aesthetic and visceral world—which is why I use them without deconstructing them.

This exploration of Paglia became a trial, a sentencing of man for intruding and for the crimes man has committed against the mother. All men, as a collective, for their separation from the bounty the mother has provided for them. In western society the Apollonian is glorified and vilified, while all that is Dionysian is reduced to archaic tribalism. Nature has been reduced to series of laws and paintings, a pretty logical picture for man to study and organize. The exploration became less about the gay male and his rejection of woman, but about the rejection and destructive efforts of all men against the mother. While the original inspiration came from the Paglia quote about the homosexual male this was not explicitly shown in the performance. Instead of beginning the performance with the
erotic relationship of two men, creating a very specific narrative for the piece, I choose to leave this part out. Beginning the performance in the middle, somewhere after this relationship had been established and the sin committed.

My initial goal was to create a work that embodied the rejection of the feminine within the gay male body. However, in the end the rejection never came through. There was penitence, suffering, death, choice—but the concept of rejection was lost in the process. The ascension at the end of the piece signified some resolution, which differed for each audience member, but rejection was not the ultimate trope. I believe this was because I provided a snapshot into a single moment in this story of rejection—however I left out pertinent information that perhaps would have guided the audience to the original conclusion. Specifically the beginning sections of the larger piece, involving the erotic relationships between men and the act of rejection, would have set the precedent for this concept to come through in [ABSURDUS]corpus.

The performance is the aftermath of transgression, the consequences of committing sin against the mother. There was no explanation of the sin or why the man was being punished—this became irrelevant in the subtext of the performance. In this world all that mattered was the action of punishment. The separation of genders made clear that the transgression was binary, that it was man against woman—and in this world the women held the upper hand. By not blatantly showing the origins of the piece, by leaving out the root of the performance I hoped to open it up to a broader interpretation of the work. To the audience it was no longer about a singular subculture and their actions, but about the broader theme of gender dichotomy. It became less about one man’s journey in life and more about all men and their relationship to female sexuality. However, the initial goal is still important to me and I plan on expanding the snapshot to include more of the pretext to clarify the intent. This
will most likely involve bringing other men into the work and unearthing the homoerotic content.

A response from one of the performers, Amy Millennor who played SHE, was that she felt after the performance she could now go farther into the character. There were several parts of the work that as a woman she was not comfortable performing in front of men and she asked me to change them. Which I did in order not to dictate her experience with men and play into the dominance women have experienced for years. However after the performance Millennor felt that she had released something inside of herself, a fear or shield, and that in the aftermath she could take her character to more extremes. She could embody the darker and dangerous side of her character more.

A large response that interested me was about the division of men and women in the space. Some people didn’t notice, some were upset by it and others felt a deep satisfaction. A specific question was that of trans individual and where they fit into the scheme of this set up. And my response is that they do not fit into it, just as they do not fit into the structure of our society. Our mainstream culture has no place for individuals or communities that do not fall into their gendered binary. These people are made to conform or pushed into the periphery. Thus the audience must conform to the binary we had created in the space and seating, it was a commentary on the binary of society and how arbitrary it actually is.

A question I was asked by an audience member who had been apart of the process since its conception was if I had made the piece I actually wanted to make, or if I was being polite to the audience? I came to the conclusion that I had been polite in many ways and not pushed the piece further, to come to a place of true polarity. I had settled for aesthetic and what I thought a dance piece should be, rather than letting is become what it needed to be. In this I mean, in the end I should have pushed the investigation of sexuality further, the exploration of the body deeper and the portrayal of this world too
much farther extreme. This is what I intend to do in the reworking of this performance, to make it a much uglier work.

The biggest question my cast and I had after the performance was whom the work intended for? For the audience or for the cast? Throughout the process we found that we had been broken open and restructured, our bodies altered and minds reconstituted. We had created an alternate reality that we had invested so much of ourselves in. We grew to love each other deeply and beyond knowing. As we had explored our bodies, our sexuality, our spirits, ourselves—we found that we had become a singular organism. This work became sacred to us. When it came time to perform the work there was a shock to the group, we did not want to let anyone else into our world. It was painful and felt intrusive to have an audience. At the end of each night we had to spend long moments with each other to recover from what had occurred. In order to alleviate this shock I made some choices about the beginning and ending of the work that would smooth the transition for my cast. The performance begins before the audience had arrived; we began diving into this world together. Before we see the audience we are already in our own reality. Then the audience is integrated into the performance through ritual and initiation, the audience becomes apart of our world. And finally in the end, we do not bow—we do not acknowledge the performance. Because for us it was not a performance, it was our reality. We simply leave the space and return the audience to the outside world. To bow and receive praise would have felt like a lie.

As I reexamine the work, I have to ask myself who do I want the performance to be for. The answer is that because it is not a performance, we do not perform any aspect of it but rather experience it; it is not made for the audience. [ABSURDUS]corpus is made for the participants, to break us open. The audience is just a witness of that process and experience. I think that is one of the things that made it so powerful for many of the audience members, because it was a lived
experience—each moment real and felt. It was truly a prodigy of the Judson Church era—process valued higher that product.

[This is my final response to [ABSURDUS]corpus. I am so caught up in it all, it doesn’t seem real, doesn’t seem to have happened. Will I wake up with start to find myself at the beginning? At the point of conception. Perhaps this is the point on conception, the ejaculation. It all begins here, its about to start, its not over. This process, this experience is only the first ultrasound of gestation. SO much more development, so much more growth and clarity will come. Perhaps it is time to rest, to look at this organism, to think about it, stare at it. And then to dive deeper, more fully into it again, to expand. To contract. To find the middle ground. Why let go of a beautiful child that is on the edge of maturity. It is time to critically examine this beast, to find its weaknesses, strengths, and powers; to delve into those. Does it get bigger? Does it get smaller? Where do I add? Where do I cut? The writing—that is what this is—to delve into the material more fully to clarify the intention. Am I able to ask myself these questions? Right now? What, why? What the fuck is this piece about? What and where did it come from? These are the questions that need to be answered. Is it possible or even good/bad to create the same work all my life? Different sides, different faces; different—but the same.]
Glossary

Athene- A Sea Goddess, worshipped in Libya and Cyprus. She is the daughter and consort of Poseidon. Born from the sea she comes from the primordial muck of life.

D'jinn- In Arab myth, is a spirit capable of taking human or animal form and exercising supernatural influence over people. Considered seductive and ethereal, heard on the whispering winds.

Dryad- a minor nature goddess usually depicted as a beautiful young woman; the ancient Greeks believed that dryads inhabited forests and bodies of water, and would take physical form when no man was present. Many myths are centered around men sneaking sights on dryads.

Hamadryad- a specific type of nymph that dwells in trees, each hamadryad inhabits a single tree; connected to the life of it and dies with it.

Kali- the Dark Mother, She who is Death. Associated with time, death, sexuality, violence, and motherly love. Kali is characterized as black or blue, partially or completely naked, with a long tongue, multiple arms, a skirt of human arms, a necklace of decapitated heads. She is often portrayed standing or dancing on her husband, Shiva, who lies beneath her.

Madonna- The term that describes the Iconic and pictorial representation of Mary, the mother of Jesus. Represented as holy and innocent, beyond reproach. Highly revered as the Mother of God she is almost always centered in representations, with a bath of heavenly light. She is one of the few women to have such a high stature in the Western churches.

Medusa- The gorgon in Greek mythology, this terrible woman is the paragon of all women, whom every man simultaneously fears and seeks. Medusa is the mask of the great Goddess Mother whose rites were concealed by the Gorgon's face. Depicted with snakes for hair, menstrual blood in her veins and the ability to turn men to stone with her gaze.

Neith- An Egyptian goddess of war and of hunting. In her form as a goddess of war, she was said to make the weapons of warriors and to guard their bodies when they died. Her name means water and is the personification of the primordial waters of creation. She is identified as a great mother goddess in this role as a creator.

Pass- refers to a person's ability to be regarded as a member of the opposite sex or different gender through physical presentation and mannerism.

Sirens- dangerous and beautiful creatures, portrayed as femmes fatales who lured sailors with their enchanting music and voices to shipwreck on the rocky coast of their islands.
Sky-Cult- Defined by Paglia as the phallic, transcendent ideology of the Apollonian mind. This mind has created the monotheistic religions of the Western world, and consider the earth and corporeal as inferior.

Valkyrie- In Norse legend they are a host of female figures that decide which soldiers die in battle and which live. Selecting those who die, the Valkyrie brings their chosen soldiers to the afterlife hall of the slain, Valhalla.

Western- The world affected by the Apollonian mind, consisting of mostly of Western Europe and North America-societies that are influenced by Aristotelian philosophy, The Enlightenment and Judeo-Christian thought. Western societies work under the structures and philosophies that differ from Eastern, colonialized and indigenous societies.


Mikkola, Mari, "Feminist Perspectives on Sex and Gender", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2012 Edition)*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.)


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