

Q+A with Michael Anthony García and Ryan Hawk

Q+A

 Visual Art

Conflict of Interest

🕒 April 27, 2017

Experimental Action 2017 is a three-day performance art festival, showcasing both local and international artists. *Experimental Action* aims to cultivate an environment of engagement and exchange that expands artistic possibility through progressive creative action while exposing Houston audiences to innovative performance art.

Austin-based *Ryan Hawk* utilizes video, performance, and site-specific installation to critically engage ideas of materiality and explore alternative corporealities and forms of embodiment.

Using found objects—often including clothing and furniture—and multimedia, Austin-based *Michael Anthony García* conveys the minutiae of fleeting moments of interaction between the body, the mind, and our prowess (or missteps) in coping with the human condition.

Alison Starr: Will each of you briefly describe how you view performance art as an integral part of your artistic practice?

Ryan Hawk: All of my work—whether or not it takes the form of what we understand performance art to be—is tied to the history of performance art. Concerns with the body, representation, and the role of the artist are driving concepts for a majority of my works. I approach art-making as a means to understand the constitution of subjectivity—how something or someone comes to be through social, cultural, and political influence—and performance art, being a medium based in bodies and action, serves as a tool for my critical investigations.

For example, in my video installation work *Untitled (heads)*, six monitors display tightly cropped videos of various anonymous male subjects continuously moaning and groaning. Because the frame never changes, a viewer is never equipped with any source of the action, and the subjects are therefore suspended between pleasure and pain. In fact, what the viewer may never discover from this work is that the subjects are being anally fisted beyond the frame. The subjects become metonymies for an action that exists beyond the image; they point to an alternative possibility, something “behind,” or perhaps even a code. There is often performativity like this within my work, be it through language or mediated action.



Untitled (heads), Ryan Hawk, six-channel HD video and audio installation, 2015

Michael Anthony García: As an artist who does work in various disciplines besides performance, I've always likened switching between mediums to the way I code-switch as a bilingual individual between Spanish and English. There are certain ideas I can communicate more precisely in English, but there are others for which there are no phrases that exist to express them except in Spanish. I've experienced working in vain to use one medium when another would have been a better fit. Over the years I've become more in tune with when to use sculpture or video versus performance, etc.



El Capacitor, Michael Anthony García, City of Austin commissioned public work, social practice, 2016 (photo: Jaime Salvador Castillo)

AS: Ryan, your use of materials other than your body is minimal and yet direct. Will you talk about this briefly?

RH: I'm very interested in both the historical trajectory of and current discussions about philosophical and artistic ideas of materiality. I like to think that my work is part of a trajectory that sets a materialist context for the body, one that engages material pluralisms and all the complications.

I'm drawn to specific materials that can be considered abject—cast off as vulgar, grotesque, or even absurd—because they reveal the cultural and social repression of bodies and bodily functions. Covering an entire body in a gooey material, like in my series *GAK Portraits*, ultimately deems the body abject and renders it inside-out.

I'm interested in this process as a means of highlighting the messy and often negated forms of embodiment, instances in which unknown desires or repulsions are made visible, like realizing that you've been rolling a booger between your fingers for far too long. I am interested in transcribing these complex physiological intimacies—conflicts between body, mind, and nature—as a method to materialize power and agency, as well as to trace the ways in which the subject is constituted.



GAK Portrait #1, Ryan Hawk, HD video on monitor, 8min loop, 2014-15

AS: Michael Anthony, I often experience your work as if I were in a domestic setting, likely due to your use of objects the viewer might associate with home life. Is this a fair read? If so, could you describe your use of domestic objects as props or material in your performance art?

MAG: As with many artists' work, the materials I use carry many connotations. Viewers will always read into the materials via their own personal experiences, and my work is not different. Whereas I select my media via my connection to their meanings, the only domesticity that I attempt to project through them is a sense of familiarity. They are entry points to the work itself.



All That You Can Be, Michael Anthony García, performance, 2016 (photo: Gabriel Christover Perez)

AS: Ryan, some of your current work appears to be void of your own body. For example, the live piece at Walter's in Houston was performed by three middle-aged men. Will you address this embrace of engaging other bodies to enact your work? What is the impetus and inspiration for the work?

RH: I came to understand the medium of performance through my own body, much like other artists who come to performance, but I cannot currently justify making work through/with/by the representation of my own physical body. Over the past three years, I've been slowly stepping into different roles within the work and attempting to locate my critical concerns on or within other physical bodies. I have specifically been working with middle- to late-aged Caucasian men. This ultimately feels like a more productive way to interrogate the constitution and representation of masculinity and/or maleness.

In the work presented in *Experimental Action*, I employed three 40-plus-year-old white male actors to stage a sort of tragic cry-in; the actors were instructed to continuously sustain the act of crying for a duration of 12 minutes. Prior to the performance, I had treated their skin with a translucent material that was only made visible when pulled off—something they slowly did throughout the performance. It was quite tragic and theatrical, which is also new to me and my practice, but I ultimately employed the theatre (melodramatic acting) to activate the process of suspending disbelief as ironic.

AS: Michael Anthony, Samuel Beckett comes to mind quite often when experiencing your live work. There can be a bleak outlook on human existence; a tragic challenge and dark finality. Yet the work carries comedy, dark though it may be. Is there a connection with his work?

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MAG: There is no overt connection to Beckett's work, but I can see a bit of a theatricality and literary contrivance in my work, even though they are object-based performances.

Processing the heavy nature of our daily existence through a comedic lens is very much my personal approach to life. I grew up in a family of jokesters and pranksters. We laugh a lot. I can directly tie my sense of humor and its infusion into all aspects of my being to my father and his personality. It's how my family copes with difficulty and the day-to-day trek through life. It was only natural for that worldview to seep into my creative practice as well.

AS: What are a couple of the reasons you decided to participate in Experimental Action?

RH: I previously worked with Experimental Action organizers Julia Claire Wallace and Evan McCarley in 2014 as part of the Lone Star Explosion festival; I've known all of them for many years and truly respect what they're doing and have done for the community. In fact, Julia is the one who introduced me to performance art when I was about 17 years old. I would argue that she is the parental figure of performance art in Houston.



Untitled (lamenting), Ryan Hawk, performance (photo: Rebecca Botells; performers: Kevin Stalls, Chris Mayo, and Bradford T. Roberts)

MAG: For the most part, I love living in Austin and am quite appreciative of the broad artistic landscape, but there is quite a dearth of performance art and performance art opportunities. While performance is but one aspect of my practice, the lack of opportunities can take its toll on my output. I have worked with the people behind Experimental Action in various capacities over the years and have loved all our interactions. I respect what they do and what they have established in Houston, so when they invited me, it was both a great chance to develop ideas I've had brewing for a while and an honor to get to work with people I respect.



In One Ear, Michael Anthony García, performance for Experimental Action, 2017 (photo: Brandon Zech)

AS: The organizers have a clear mission for the festival. One goal in particular is to create “a short-term community. Through communal housing and meals, local artists and volunteers and incoming artists connect, creating cultural exchange, lasting connections, and future collaborations.” How has this aspect of their mission been accomplished for and through you?

RH: I’m really grateful to have reconnected with the Houston community and to see how much it’s grown, as well as to have had the opportunity to form relationships with other artists that I may not have met otherwise.

MAG: This short-term community has been one of the most satisfying aspects of this festival for me. It acts as professional development and gives us a close-up look at what others in our field are working on, and we get to bounce ideas off each other in our downtime. Genuine friendships develop through this structure as well. I have worked with several of the artists in the festival on two occasions now, and we keep in touch outside of this context.

AS: Performance art is considered a time- and space-based art form. Will you describe how you managed both the spaces provided and the time allotted to you during EA Houston? How did these two aspects of performance art become a catalyst for spontaneity or a hindrance to making your work?

RH: My performance at Experimental Action was the first time I produced/scored a performance (as opposed to performing one myself) in a live context. I’ve been staging performances with other people for many years, but privately and in front of a camera. I wanted this performance to happen unexpectedly, so the actors were placed in the middle of the audience, and it started rather abruptly right after another performance had just ended on the stage. It was important to have this piece begin in this way so that the actors, as well as the audience, had to determine the “stage.”

MAG: The work that I generally produce via performance can be seen as vignettes or poems. They tend to be thematic, lyrical, and bite-size. I have produced a few durational works, but I have a penchant for shorter, impactful but easily digested performance.

AS: What are some of the challenges and benefits of participating in a festival as opposed to a solo exhibition?

RH: I feel like solo exhibitions and performing at a festival are not comparable. For me, performing in a festival is like being in a group show in the sense that all the works presented are in conversation with one another. In solo exhibitions, an artist usually has full control over the space in which the work is shown.

MAG: In the case of solo performance, I’ve always produced it within the context of solo gallery-based work for which it was part of an installation. It was created as an element of something larger, whereas doing performance work through a festival like EA, it is back to back with the work of many other individuals. This places more importance on the role of the curator to weave thematic elements from artist to artist and/or make sure no two side-by-side works are excessively similar (unless it is intentionally done to drive home an image). Festival programming creates a venue and audience that is prepared for performance work and sought it out. It’s a double-edged sword, though. By having a variety of performance work mixed together in a venue, you can also lose emotional momentum once one work is complete and the viewer is immediately engulfed in another.

AS: How might your EA experience guide you in creating future work?

MAG: Seeing a few other artists at EA step away from being the center of their own work was quite empowering for me to experience. I tend to obsess over details in my work and have difficulty delegating when it comes to my overall practice, but seeing how freeing it can be to not use your own body in the production of a performance piece was quite liberating. I want to challenge myself to step out of my performance work in the future and see how that affects its direction and creation.

AS: Any final comments?

RH: I want to thank everyone involved with the Experimental Action festival in Houston because it was a truly great experience.

MAG: I think festivals like EA create important, transgressive moments to both connect and educate the general public to just how broad a swath of thinkers are out there in the world. Seeing artists like Chris Stevens take to the streets outside of Notsuoh and engage passersby is an important part of connecting and demonstrating that other viewpoints are important in the world. This has never been more crucial than it is now. Either by drawing in others' eyes via taking to the streets or piquing people's curiosity enough for them to buy a festival badge, performance art and festivals in particular are perfect for bursting us all out of our safe bubbles.

Alison Starr is a visual artist, lecturer, and curator. She currently manages the Cliff Gallery at Mountain View College and is a member of ARTBEEF artist Collective, Dallas, Texas.

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