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In biology, moulting is the process by which many species of animal shed a part of their bodies, often an external layer of skin or fur or feathers or, as with arthropods, an entire exoskeleton. This can happen annually at specific times of year, or over the course of an animal's life cycle. Humans do not naturally moult, although not for lack of trying. Loofah sponges and pumice stones, exfoliating face scrubs, micro-derma rollers, chemical peels: we have invented all manner of products and processes to slough off our dead skin cells and attempt, however momentarily, to cheat time. And to the extent that, as human animals, we are now evolving along with our technologies, it might be that we eventually do away with the need for bodies altogether, uploading our consciousness to a computer in a version of what theorists of superintelligence call "the singularity."

At the end of "On the Concept of History," Walter Benjamin, citing a "recent biologist," writes of the history of humankind as "a monstrous abbreviation" within the larger timescale of what we would now call geologic "deep time."¹ That is, to the extent that it is always the present moment that, as human actors, we experience most insistently and urgently, we would do well to remember that such moments are but blips in the history of the universe. On the one hand, this might seem to absolve us of taking responsibility for, or preventative action against, our climate emergency. But this is only if we think of time as continuous and linear and the present as a simple transition between past and future. For Benjamin, precisely because of its intensity of experience (what he would call its Messianism), the present is at once a point of standstill and a point of potential rupture. In other words, it is a place from which we can blast apart historical axioms (noting, for example, that a belief in human exceptionalism is what, despite our abridged existence, has wrought so much damage to our planet in so little time) and rewrite the scripts by which we might move forward *from now* (which means recognizing that the real catastrophe is accepting the continuation of things as they are). In the space between standstill and rupture, time is momentarily suspended,

and change becomes possible. Something similar happens during the process of moulting. And in performance.

In . . . *wreckage upon wreckage* . . . , which was remounted at Kitchener-Waterloo's Open Ears Festival in June 2022, the Vancouver-based sound and performance artist Nancy Tam takes up this idea of betweenness in the form of a durational performance installation and immersive soundscape that posits the body's architecture, along with its ghostly traces, as a site from which to reflect on the intersection between an abstracted sense of historical time and one's physical experience of material, fleshly existence. Over the course of the performance, which can range from several hours to an entire day, Tam, working with her collective A Wake of Vultures, as well as composer and sound artist Charlie Cooper, wraps her naked body from head to toe in plastic cling wrap, encasing herself in a human chrysalis, and also mummifying herself as an artifact of the present. Once this process is complete, she then carefully cuts away the protective materials in an act of forced moulting, leaving behind an eerie gossamer shell of her body's shape that she illuminates with a small tea lamp. She then starts all over again, sculpting and then shedding more than a dozen second skins whose placement within the performance space accrues additional sensory and affective meaning with their multiplication. They are past selves and discarded avatars, rejected likenesses and poor clones, cast off inheritances and future hauntings, the dead and how we must learn to live with them. Taking its inspiration (and title) from Benjamin's ninth thesis in "On the Concept of History," in which the Paul Klee painting *Angelus Novus* (1920) prompts Benjamin to liken historical progress to an accumulation of ruins, . . . *wreckage upon wreckage* . . . asks how we commemorate our daily and hourly survival of a system that posits capitalism as the end of history. What are the rituals—as women, as minorities, as queers (or, in Tam's case, as a queer minority woman)—by which we account for, and honor, the work of living as forging connections between past and present, rather than simply seeking to reproduce the next interchangeable instant?

Appropriately, Tam foregrounds this through the labour of her performance. The homeliness of her materials—plastic wrap, tape, a pair of scissors—belies the extreme physical effort that goes into the creation of each of her sculptural selves. Beginning with her feet and legs, moving to her torso and then head, and finishing with her arms, the process of wrapping her body, taping down the loose ends of plastic wrap, and then cutting everything away can take Tam anywhere from thirty to fifty minutes, depending on the time of day, and her energy level. Indeed, over the course of the documentation of the Open Ears performance, we frequently see Tam taking rests, massaging her limbs and neck, letting down and then re-pinning her hair. For most folks, the labor of living is indeed exhausting. But in our post-Fordist society, the alienating conditions of much of that labor are made invisible and deemed immaterial. By repurposing a common household item that is not just paradigmatic of how such labor is additionally gendered within domestic contexts

but also tied to the inequitable financial distribution of petro-capital across different class strata (for much of its history, an “everlasting” and non-biodegradable but relatively cheap means to preserve leftover food), Tam deftly comments on the means by which different groups of people are able to leave their imprint on this world. To this end, it strikes me that . . . *wreckage upon wreckage* . . . is an ideal performance to mark our slow emergence from Covid-induced lockdown. On the one hand, the metaphor of moulting points to the shedding of old habits or patterns, and the re-invention of work and life routines, that for many was a hallmark of the pandemic pause (although sometimes chosen and sometimes imposed). At the same time, in looking at the profusion of plastic that ends up littering the stage at the end of the performance, I can’t help thinking of the excess consumer detritus that is one consequence of two years of pandemic buying, with warehouses across North America now filled with panicked or bored customers’ returned items.

As with the elasticity of time, so many of us experienced as a consequence of quarantining or sheltering in place over the course of the pandemic, the performative intensity of . . . *wreckage upon wreckage* . . . also ebbs and flows. The sound score by Cooper, composed from improvised material made in response to Tam’s rehearsals, responds to this bodily sense of chronicity, of being at once stuck in and outside of time. Structured as a fixed sixty-minute loop, it progresses through its own peaks and valleys of sonic intensity in ways that are less about cuing Tam’s actions than attuning our sensory experience of them—not least by subtly underscoring rather than layering over the sounds of Tam wrapping and taping her skins. The score’s use of AI-generated text functions in a similar manner. The language we hear is the result of Cooper feeding a range of sacred and secular texts into a software program that then began replicating its own “holy” syntaxes, complete with unique grammatical structures. Seeking out interesting repetitions of phrases, while also paying attention to their aural cadences within the text-to-speech system he was working with, Cooper then included in the score a selection of text that, on the one hand, *reads* as nonsense, but that we *hear* as almost oracular or quasi-divine: “We have from the organisms beneath our feet a methodology of experience. From the organisms. Sterile. Sedimentary. So we think. A methodology of experience. Beneath our feet. But to realize this experience, especially in a grim light. When we are aggregates. Is a condition to where. A condition to where. A condition to how. A condition not met. But a condition. Not failed.” As Cooper has himself said, it is as if the skins that Tam is making and shedding are speaking to us, their whispered susurrations at once comforting and disquieting.²

Of course, the very properties that make AI so troubling to my university colleagues are also what establish it as an especially generative tool for artists like Tam and Cooper. That is, AI’s ability not just to mimic human cognition, but to learn independently of it, means that it becomes another potential collaborator and compositional partner in the artistic process. In this scenario, the creative application

of AI is neither a usurping nor a counterfeiting of human authorship; rather, in a version of Annie Dorsen's "algorithmic theatre" or Christopher Small's concept of "musicking," its aesthetic use forces us to question the exceptionalism of the human agent and the singular meaning and originality of their creative endeavor.³ Instead, our focus shifts to the relationships established between and the social actions set in motion by *all* the participants (human and non-human, performing and "non-performing") in the room. As the AI-generated text previously cited posits, and as Tam's repetitive labor proves, when are we not aggregates of a larger system? A condition not met, in computing as in durational performance, is still a condition, and hardly a failure. Indeed, because the text in the sound score for . . . *wreckage upon wreckage* . . . relieves us of the burden of sense-making and primes us instead to be more open to the conditions of our *sensing*, the AI elements in the work paradoxically encourage a deeper awareness of the body's own intelligence. We see the artificial evidence of this in the proliferation of Tam's illuminated translucent casings, a reminder that the extent to which we are evolving along with our technologies is perhaps best measured not by the ubiquity of human-computer interfaces but by the accumulation of microplastics in our bodily tissue.

. . . *wreckage upon wreckage* . . . was one of two works by Tam showcased at the 2022 Open Ears Festival. The other was *Walking at Night by Myself*, an eight-channel surround-sound composition and two-person performance conceived by Tam that also features a complex projection design by Wake of Vultures collective member Daniel O'Shea and a movement score by Vancouver dance artist Lexi Vajda. Originally staged in Vancouver in 2018, the piece features two Asian performers (at Open Ears, Jasmine Chen, replacing Tam, and Anjela Magpantay) wearing matching cheongsams, and later black and white shirts and skirts. Their movements to the right and left, backwards and forwards, are accompanied by a live spatialized sound design performed by Tam that is based on original field recordings of her nighttime wanderings around Vancouver's cityscape. We hear footsteps and the whoosh of traffic and other ambient noises, which are in turn manipulated, distorted, and overlain with electronic music recorded in the studio. As the performers are moving, O'Shea's strobe-like projections (switching back and forth between vivid color spots and angular monochromatic lines) outline, shade, travel up and down, and create tessellated patterns across their bodies, sometimes isolating or warping body parts, at other times doubling and tripling profiles and magnifying silhouettes. In this way, a noirish moiré effect is enacted acoustically and visually, the sonic interference of amplified rain and binaural beats combining with the abstracted movement and the *trompe l'œil* nocturnal imagery to compel a series of double takes not just in one's spectating experience, but also in one's assimilated cultural references. For example, there is a moment when Magpantay, at this point alone on stage, repeats back and forth what appears to be a simple quarter turn, her body at once moving into and out of, with and against, the luminous vertical white lines O'Shea is just then sending across the stage. The effect, when I first saw

it in Vancouver, put me in mind of Canadian visual artist Michael Snow's iconic "Walking Woman" series (1961–67), an art historical appropriation that in this context blasts open the homogenous and white-supremacist continuum of female representation in visual and performance culture via a reclaiming of the Orientalist femme fatale figure, while also serving as a very material reminder of what it still means for a woman of color to walk by herself at night.

To this end, it merits historicizing Tam's performance of . . . *wreckage upon wreckage* . . . within a larger genealogy of solo-body performance by Asian North American artists. One thinks, in this regard, of the durational performance pieces completed by Tehching Hsieh between 1978 and 2000. Though working to a different temporal scale (diurnal rather than annual), Tam shares with Hsieh an interest in marking and documenting the "doing" of time—whether through time-stamped cards and photographs or time-stamped digital video.⁴ Even more pertinent, however, are the instructional Fluxus scores of Yoko Ono. Maybe it's because of the scissors, but when I watch Tam in . . . *wreckage upon wreckage* . . . I can't help thinking of *Cut Piece* (1964), the famous work by Ono in which she invited audience members to come up on stage one-by-one and use a pair of fabric shears to cut away a piece of her clothing. Though it wasn't originally framed as such (Ono discussed the work in 1967 as a Buddhist allegory of giving and taking), *Cut Piece* has been taken up in art history as a canonical work of feminist performance that, partly as a result of its documentation (especially excerpts of the 1965 Carnegie Hall performance, filmed by the Maysles brothers, which are readily available via YouTube), is read as an indictment of women's sexual objectification.⁵ In Tam's case, she alone has control over the scissors and, in terms of choosing to perform nude, the representation of her objecthood. But it bears noting that there are iterations of both *Cut Piece* and . . . *wreckage upon wreckage* . . . that feature male-identifying performers. Indeed, to the extent that both pieces are concerned with what it means, on an historical-materialist level, to exist as bodies in time and space that at once act and are acted upon, what would it mean, in the words of Lara Shalson, to read both works as providing opportunities to think through "the vulnerability and opacity that attends *everyone's* embodied existence?"⁶

As Shalson makes clear, this is not to jettison a feminist reading of embodied performances by women. Nor is it, in Tam's case, to erase her identity as Asian-Canadian. Rather, I am interested in the ways that Tam, like Ono, implicates her audience in the experience of object relations. In Tam's case, this has much to do with the structuring of her piece as a durational and immersive installation, in which the framework of spectatorial voyeurism is obviated by the fact that audience members must sit (literally) in relation not just to Tam's body and its proliferation of ghostly carapaces, but to each other. In other words, the bodily vulnerability experienced by Tam in connection to an audience's collective gaze is replicated—albeit in different ways and to different degrees—in the vulnerability we might experience as a



Installation view of . . .wreckage upon wreckage. . . Photo: Daniel O'Shea. Courtesy Nancy Tam and A Wake of Vultures.



Nancy Tam and Anjela Magpantay in *Walking By Myself at Night*, Modulus Festival, Music on Main (2019). Photo: © Jan Gates. Courtesy Music on Main.

result of our looking being placed in networked relay. I am sure I am not the only audience member to experience self-consciousness regarding the ways in which my looking, as a spectator, is not only being looked at, but also potentially evaluated (i.e., “Am I doing this correctly?”).

Ono performed *Cut Piece* five times between 1964 and 1966 and subsequently oversaw several presentations of the piece featuring other performers. In 2003, at age seventy and sitting on a chair rather than the bare stage, she performed the piece once more in Paris as a statement in support of world peace.⁷ Likewise, . . . *wreckage upon wreckage* . . . has had several iterations: first in 2012, under the title *Moulting*, in Vancouver; later the same year as part of Nextfest in Edmonton; in 2013 as a group work that was included in the performance programming accompanying the Performance Studies international (PSi) conference at Stanford University; in 2016, with Daniel O’Shea performing, as part of the P-Bodies Festival in Leipzig; and, finally, in 2022 at Open Ears. Over the course of its various iterations, Tam’s work has itself moulted, shedding and acquiring new layers (including its title), morphing from a solo to an ensemble work and back again, from a presentation format that is durational and installation-based to one that was briefly a framed proscenium performance and then something serial and site-specific, and from a supporting sound score originally composed by Tam to one composed in whole or in part by invited collaborators, including Kaj Duncan David (2012), Finley Hyde (2013), and Cooper (2022). And while it would be a stretch to suggest that the successive stagings of Tam’s and Ono’s works constitute re-enactments, in Rebecca Schneider’s influential theorization of the phenomenon, it is worth emphasizing that for Schneider repetition in performance is about interrupting and syncopating time, about making different times touch by casting the residue of what is in the past into the future. In other words, when time returns through the affective labor of performance, “What does it *drag* along with it?”⁸

For Schneider, as for other theorists of re-enactment in art history and performance studies, repetition is at once an aesthetic form and an analytical framework that allows for a self-reflexive engagement not just with the performativity of performance, but with the necessarily mediated nature of experience and memory.⁹ Viewed this way, any uncritical franchising of an event is rendered suspect both by the incompleteness of its original presentation context and by the capacity for that context, as with *Cut Piece*, to morph and change over time for both performer and audience.¹⁰ So too with . . . *wreckage upon wreckage* . . . in its successive iterations. It was first mounted, as a twenty-four-hour performance, under the auspices of Tam’s interdisciplinary MFA studies, when she was consciously seeking to broaden her practice as a composer and sound artist by experimenting with some of the techniques and conventions of theatre and performance art. She quickly discovered, however, that the piece was not suited to the temporal and spectating constraints of an abbreviated black-box staging, as it was presented at Nextfest in June 2012.

Indeed, in its ritual manifesting of not just the bodily labor of performance, but the archival traces of that labor, . . . *wreckage upon wreckage* . . . needs to be durational, unfolding since 2013 over a ten-to-twelve-hour period from dusk to dawn. At the same time, the very structure of the work, as an extended exercise in revealing the body's scaffolding, invites the participation of additional performers (O'Shea and Sean Marshall Jr., joining Tam, in 2013; O'Shea performing solo in 2016), and makes it readily adaptable to different architectural environments.

Thus, for me as a spectator, watching video documentation of the indoor Open Ears presentation of . . . *wreckage upon wreckage* . . . , I am affected not just by a sense of Tam re-presencing past memories of her originary performance (also indoors); I am also necessarily dragged back to the 2013 PSi performances of the piece, which were done outdoors at night in front of a grand fountain in one of the lushly planted and palm-tree lined plazas of Stanford's Romanesque and Mission Revival campus. I remember that it was very hot during the PSi conference and that California, then as now, was in the middle of a fearsome drought. And yet everywhere at Stanford the sprinklers were flowing and the lawns were a vivid green. Grateful though I was for the cool of night in watching Tam and her collaborators perform . . . *wreckage upon wreckage* . . . , I recall thinking that the second skins they left in their wake were fitting carrion for our starving and slowly dying planet, plastic remains that would at once outlive, mark, and indict our abridgment of its history.

Not surprisingly, given their shared focus on temporal rupture and reoccurrence, Schneider references Benjamin in her study on re-enactment. She does so in a chapter in which she discusses the (a)liveness of still photography, noting that for Benjamin an encounter with an old photograph casts the past not simply as something contingent with the here and now, but also, much like a playscript or performance score, as an address directed to future viewers.¹¹ In this equation, the live event and its mechanical reproduction through the technologies and techniques of documentation need not be opposed. Instead, they cross-constitute, or "inter(in) animate," each other, troubling the fetishization of "presence" and "liveness" that gets repeated in much writing on performance.¹² Indeed, Philip Auslander has gone so far as to suggest that "*the act of documenting an event as a performance is what constitutes it as such.*"¹³ This is important when thinking through Tam's methodology in the piece. For not only is she documenting her embodied existence in real time through a *synthetic* performance of moulting, making visible the otherwise immaterial traces of her labor as an agent of and in history; she also incorporates into the performance a tertiary documentation of that documentation, with video and photography securing less a record, in time, of "what happened" than an invitation to engage, across and over time, with both its incompleteness and its ongoing-ness.

The present essay derives from a response to both the archive of the work's Open Ears documentation and the repertoires of past live performances. Citing each as

equally integral to the remixing of my reception of this work undoes the authority of precedence; instead, the piece's reperformance, necessarily brushing "against the grain" of history, allows us to examine our investments in the past (artistic or otherwise), while also asking what can be made to happen differently when things are redone.¹⁴ So too with the protocols of academic citation. Benjamin's essay, from which Tam takes her title, has, for most of its published life, been known in English as "Theses on the Philosophy of History," and appears as such in *Illuminations*, the 1968 volume of writings edited by Hannah Arendt and translated by Harry Zohn.¹⁵ But in the 2000s, scholars began retranslating many of Benjamin's iconic essays, and this particular one is now generally referred to as "On the Concept of History." In the version I am citing from, translated by Dennis Redman, the famous ninth thesis, on Klee's *Angelus Novus*, renders "wreckage upon wreckage" as "rubble on top of rubble."¹⁶ As with live versus mediated versions of Tam's performance, the one does not cancel out the other. Rather, as Benjamin noted of the task of translation more generally, each contains an echo of the original, and each resounds in relation to, but at a necessary distance from, the source.¹⁷

Given that Tam is a sound artist, I am drawn to the echo as a metaphor through which to understand not just this reperformance of . . . *wreckage upon wreckage* . . . , but also my analysis of it here. As Iris Blake has noted, in an echo, there is "a time lag between what is sounded and what is heard."¹⁸ Far from being empty, this gap, or "zero-hour," to use Benjamin's terms, is full of potential. It is an opportunity to listen more deeply, to attune one's body more carefully in relation to a vibrational event. This is what Tam has done in revisiting her own work. It is what I have also tried to do in placing myself in relation to its re-voicing.

NOTES

1. Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," trans. Dennis Redmond, *Marxists Internet Archive*, accessed August 14, 2023, <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/benjamin/1940/history.htm>.

2. Charlie Cooper, email message to author, August 8, 2022.

3. See Annie Dorsen, "On Algorithmic Theatre," *Theater*, accessed August 14, 2023, <https://theatermagazine.org/web-features/article/algorithmic-theater>; Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1998).

4. Tehching Hsieh's "Doing Time" exhibition, curated by Adrian Heathfield, was included as part of the 2017 Venice Biennale. Adrian Heathfield, "Doing Time," accessed August 14, 2023, <https://www.adrianheathfield.net/project/doing-time>.

5. See Kevin Concannon, "Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece*: From Text to Performance and Back Again," *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 30, no. 3 (2008): 88.

6. Lara Shalson, *Performing Endurance: Art and Politics Since 1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 54.

7. Concannon, "Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece*," 81.
8. Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 2. Emphasis in original.
9. See, for example, Sven Lutticken, *Life Once More: Forms of Reenactment in Contemporary Art* (Rotterdam: Witte de With, 2005); Amelia Jones and Adrian Heathfield, eds., *Perform, Repeat, Record: Live Art in History* (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2012).
10. On this very topic in relation to *Cut Piece*, see Robert Blackson, "Once More . . . with Feeling: Reenactment in Contemporary Art and Culture," *Art Journal* 66, no. 1 (2007): 38.
11. Schneider, *Performing Remains*, 163. Schneider is citing Walter Benjamin, "A Small History of Photography," in *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London: New Left Books, 1979), 240–257.
12. Schneider, *Performing Remains*, 6.
13. Philip Auslander, "The Performativity of Performance Documentation," *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 28, no. 3 (2006): 5. Emphasis in original.
14. Benjamin, "On the Concept of History."
15. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968), 253–64.
16. Benjamin, "On the Concept of History."
17. Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," in *Illuminations*, 76.
18. Iris Sandjette Blake, "Decolonial Echoes: Voicing and Listening in Rebecca Belmore's Sound Performance," *Performance Matters* 6, no. 2 (2020): 10.

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