



Navigating Art Practices During the Pandemic: [Performance Art in the Times of Social Distance](#)

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Performance Art in the Times of Social Distance was the second virtual brunch hosted by the Creative Citizens in Action initiative at California College of the Arts. The brunch featured performance artists Maria Clara Merçon (she/her) and randy reyes (they/them). Co-moderated by CCA faculty Sam Vernon and Graphic Design student Menaja Ganesh, this event explored how two performance artists are navigating their art practices under the limitations of COVID-19. During this tumultuous time, many artists have asked themselves, “How do I adapt my art practice *and* continue to build exposure for myself in the middle of a pandemic? How can I use objects and materials at hand in my home as a part of my practice?”

Maria Clara Merçon is a multimedia artist, educator, and CCA alumna from Niteroi, Brazil, currently based in Oakland. Clara Merçon presented video documentation of her performance, *The Promise of Development Brought More Shipwrecks than Sailors*, 2019. The piece was inspired by Eduardo Galeano’s book *Open Veins of Latin America*, 1971, which examined five centuries of exploitation, genocide, and theft in Latin America. The performance’s title points to the second part of the book that explores how US intervention forced Latin America to develop according to the USA’s rules. This exploitation started with the Spanish conquistadors during colonization and continued with the rule of the CIA-supported banana republics. The struggles of this oppression caused many Latin American communities to idealize lives in Europe and the US, causing some to take life-threatening risks in their quest for a better life elsewhere. Clara Merçon explored the “Western Dream” through her own experience as an immigrant. *The Promise of Development Brought More Shipwrecks than Sailors* was a collaborative performance between Clara Merçon and Juan Huerta Coelle on

the iconic Lombard Street in the Russian Hill area of San Francisco – a predominantly white and wealthy neighborhood. In the performance, both artists carefully pass a piece of pavement back and forth as they walk up the hill. “This piece of pavement is a literal signifier of our hopes and dreams and our idea of the American Dream – how we cherish it and hold it dearly to our hearts,” said the artist while reflecting on the work. To end the performance, the artists left the pavement morsel at the top of Lombard Street. I see this act as a symbol of accomplishment, acknowledging that the artists finally made it to the US after holding on to that distant dream for so long. They can now focus on building their lives.

Growing up in Brazil near the ocean, waterfalls, and her grandfather’s fishing, water was the main character in Clara Merçon’s artistic development. She grew to view water as both a symbol of protection and a tool for colonizing oppression. Her *Untitled Video Poem* explores that duality, showing photographs and video footage from her trip to Brazil projected onto bodies of water from her bathtub, the river at the Mormon temple in Oakland, and the SF Bay. The photos and videos appear as if they are floating on the water as she narrates her intimate and tender poem in Portuguese. These places are part of what she considers home, and she ties the two together by showing water as both a barrier yet a connector, as it links each location together. The artist successfully conveyed the feelings of tenderness, nostalgia, uncertainty, longing for human connection, and hope, belonging, and fragility – all very relevant to our current political and social climate. This piece reflects the future’s uncertainty: not knowing when we will see our loved ones in person again, and our perseverance to achieve our goals despite this massive blow to all of our lives.

Co-moderator Menaja Ganesh then introduced randy reyes, a queer Afro-Guatemalan choreographer, performance artist, and healer born in the Lenape territory and currently based in the Bay Area, Muwekma Ohlone territory. reyes creates deeply personal solo performances focused on the psychological states inflicted by intergenerational trauma. When performing, reyes becomes an object within the space, allowing emotions to permeate from their body through their performance area as though space gives birth to them. reyes noted that this “feeling that has no name” can be felt and expressed in various ways, and their work supports them to shed layers of their personhood that no longer serve a purpose. Another iteration of *not the same old thing* or *u.u.u.*, April 2019, shows the artist in a dark space surrounded by the audience, the pulsing of club music in the background. reyes wears a green wig and dances to the beat of the music, employing brief robotic-like moves at first, then moving to more ecstatic movements. Finally, they fall to the floor after their body visibly moves through grief. reyes demonstrates pain and empowerment

simultaneously through their movements. There was a moment of emotional and physical vulnerability as their wig fell off, signifying the reclamation of their identity and becoming one with themselves.

reyes then presented *Vulture Realness Invocation*, June 2020. The performance opens with reyes scrunching into a ball in an open air space. The artist is surrounded by colorful ball-pit balls, scattered around the outdoor wooden deck. The same green wig the artist wore in the aforementioned performance falls over their face, acting as a form of protection. reyes seems to be expressing a state of internal pain, attempting to develop the strength to break free from what is weighing them down. Like in *u.u.u.*, reyes' emotions emanate through the room to create an environment that metabolizes grief, creating work that can heal and make sense of their feelings.

Sam Vernon noted how viewing both artists' works online was a powerful experience; being with them physically would make them even more impactful. She asked them how they were dealing with this new reality of limited resources and travel restrictions during the pandemic. Clara Merçon answered that she felt hopeless at the beginning of the quarantine. However, using easily accessible materials, such as the bathtub in her home and fabric, allowed her work to be more accessible for her to make. Utilizing the virtual world to provide more exposure for her work allowed it to become more accessible for others. For reyes, isolation allowed them to self reflect and make time for self-care. reyes has held on to performance as a medium during the pandemic since they can express their feelings to others through it, and create spaces that support others healing from collective grief. This transition from the physical to the virtual emphasizes the relatable problem of creating boundaries between work and home, as many of us continue to work remotely.

These last eight months felt like a lifetime in terms of the mental, socio-political, geographical, and strategic terrains we have journeyed across. Viewing and experiencing these artists' works and listening to how they are making this time benefit them and their creative goals is a huge motivation to us as a creative community here at CCA. Both Maria Clara Merçon and randy reyes produce thoughtful and influential works based on their identities, providing a voice for and recognition to BIPOC communities. I wish them all the best in the continuation of their creative endeavors during this time. I hope they continue to successfully perform and utilize both the virtual world and physical spaces, COVID permitting.

For more information on both of these artists and the work that they do, check out their websites/social media profiles: <https://www.randy-reyes.com/randy-reyes>, [@claraMerçon](#).

Performance Art in the Times of Social Distance was organized by Sam Vernon with Menaja Ganesh, in collaboration with the CCA Exhibitions Department for CCA@CCA.

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