De-construct the meaning of an artwork in relation to the politics of representation from the perspective of the visualisation of violence.

Artwork: 'bust: indestructible columns' (Rafa Esparza)

Born a Brown queer man to immigrants from a small town in Durango, Mexico, Rafa Esparza uses "live performance as his main form of inquiry" employing "site-specificity, materiality, memory, and what he calls (non)documentation as primary tools to investigate and expose ideologies, power structures, and binary forms of identity that establish narratives, history, and social environments" (Ballroom Mafia, 2019). Taking from his experiences as a Brown, queer man, his "perspective is not just marginalized, but defamed and criminalized thanks to the ongoing ill-treatment of queer people and people of color in the United States" (Susholtz, A., 2022, p.14). His work 'bust:indestructible columns' is one that reflects these themes; this work is the focus of my essay, discussing its demonstration of a historical and modern visualisation of violence, the community Esparza has built up surrounding the piece, and how the work ties into the world both of and around the artist.

Speaking of his initial performance of this work, Esparza explained that he "ensconced [himself] in a concrete pillar outside of the Men's Central Jail in downtown Los Angeles" freeing himself using a hand-chisel and hammer (Rafa Esparza, New York Times, 2020). Esparza's choice of words here are interesting as 'ensconced' refers to establishing oneself in a comfortable, safe place; these words in no way reflect the idea of being trapped in a concrete pillar with the surrounding imagery of a jail and in a later performance, government buildings within the US Capital. His performance in LA "was a comment on police violence and the sort of surveillance endured by black and brown bodies"; it was intentionally done it in a public place, where police might have an encountered the piece and people could bear witness, being more than a passive audience (Rafa Esparza, New York Times, 2020). However, it is the Washington DC performance I want to place most of my focus on; in this performance, Esparza was "encased in an ionic concrete column that mimics the austere architecture of The White House" (Susholtz, A., 2022, p.39) and in his words, he was "thinking about the racist rhetoric of this administration, and the column was a replica of one of those lining the porticoes at the White House" (Rafa Esparza, New York Times, 2020). Esparza has said that this work also confronts the homophobia of the U.S government. The works demonstration of the struggle of queer and Brown people within the US does not stop at the performance itself, also coming across in the 'road' to Washington; doing this work within Washington DC was said to have "disrupted the federally restricted landscape" (Susholtz, A., 2022, p.37), needing from the U.S. federal government and parks department, in addition to other government-required security measures to take place. This Washington performance started and ended with community; Esparza worked with long-time collaborator Timo Fahler who made the ionic column he was encased in and ended with a communal dinner. The artist described Fahler as a "support [column] for the communities we work within, building this other system working toward social justice" (Ballroom Mafia, 2019). Esparza further highlights the importance of community in this piece; "On a very personal level, the progression of this work from action to community dinner symposium is a way of creating a symbolic counter-image to what we're being bombarded with—traumatizing videos going viral of families being torn apart, people being raided at

their jobs, children crying. I've seen a lack of counter-narratives, or even information on how to stop that from happening—how to protect each other, how to protect these families. We're not just leaving it up to the image or symbol itself to function on its own—we're inviting folks to hear people read from their writing, people doing the actual work of organizing, and have a communal gathering afterward" (Ballroom Mafia, 2019). One of these writings that Esparza read out this evening was 'Brown Cloud' by organizer and writer Patrisse Cullors; this piece was dedicated to the community that Esparza described as "we that know diaspora, we that know colonization, we that know migration" (Hermo, C., ARTnews, 2020).

"[As] Simone Weil affirms in her sublime essay on war, "The Iliad, or The Poem of Force" (1940), violence turns anybody subjected to it into a thing" (Sontag, S. 2004). There is deep rooted racism towards Latinos on a US government level that often results in violence; one example being the deep rooted, systemic racism against immigrant populations – a number of which are Latino – found in the policies of the Immigration and Customs Enforcement, The Department of Homeland Security, and the U.S. Border Control (Ihaza, I. 2020, p.119). The Mexican-US border sees 350 million crossings a year and US$1 billion per day between 46 official border crossing sites, making it the busiest border in the world (Villanueva, N., 2017, p.3). This busyness is infused with violence, the researchers of 'Violence Committed Against Migrants in Transit: Experiences on the Northern Mexican Border' finding that one-fifth of total participants in their research have suffered violence in Mexico or the US at the border (Infante, C, Idrovo, A.J., et al, 2012, p.452). The violence experienced by Mexicans in the US does not stop at the border however; the organisation American Progress discusses the portrayal of Latinos in American media, citing that 66% of relevant news coverage between 1995-2004 - with more recent studies confirming - portrays "Latinos as criminals and outsiders" which "is especially concerning given that Latinos are otherwise rarely represented in the news media. A recent study found that between 2008 and 2014, stories focused on Latinos and issues concerning Latino communities composed just 0.78 percent of the coverage on national evening network news" (Ihaza, I. 2020, p.123). Additionally, the lack of standardization in the way police report race and ethnicity within the US further harms Latinos; ""Latino" is an ethnic designation, and Latinos can be of any race. When police violence happens against Latinos, they are oftentimes categorized by race while ethnicity is not considered. Police will label Latinos as white, Black or "other," making it harder to track instances of police brutality against Latinos. This leads experts to believe that these cases are under-reported by law enforcement" (Mora, S.A., 2021). Even with this lack of standarisation, it is still reported that "at least 1,059 Latinos have been fatally shot by police since 2015. Factor in deaths while in police custody, and the number of Latinos killed at the hands of police more than doubles to 2,139" (Mora, S.A., 2021).

While 'bust; indestructible columns' has a focus on the violence against Black and Brown bodies within the US, Esparza's queer experience also influenced his piece; "He brings to the table a distinct way of seeing queer, brown art" (Susholtz, A., 2022, p.18). It was in the 1970s that queer Americans began seeking access to mainstream Democratic and Republican Party politics, often done by activists making a "common cause with other political movements especially on the Left, including the Latin American solidarity movement" (Bell, J., 2020, p.4). The tying of queer and Latin activism at this time however did not stop several American organistaions, including state governments, entangling and empowering the queer rights movement with racism; "A growing political acceptance of gay rights in the context of twenty-first-century neoliberalism has not developed in tandem with a decline in racist paradigms but has in fact served to reinforce them, as antihomophobic politics has become ever more distinct from a wider civil rights agenda" (Bell, J., 2020, p.15). This quotation is presenting that while the political acceptance of queer rights increased state safeguarding, the pattern of state violence towards people of colour didn't decline and was instead reinforced; "Neoliberalism is... a loosely demarcated set of political beliefs which most prominently and prototypically include the conviction that the only legitimate purpose of the state is to safeguard individual...liberty" (Thorsen, D.E. and Lie, A., 2006, p.14). This use of LGBTQ+ state safeguarding to divert attention from state racism pushed queer liberation to a place of being linked with the harm of racial minorities. Furthermore, in the late 20th and early 21st century, there was an attempt "to construct barriers

between civil rights movements by casting gay rights advocates as white and not a “real” minority deserving of protection”, those in power with a deep hostility “to gay rights [feeling] able to appeal to racial stereotypes of black violence to recruit white gay people to their own agenda of legalized private policing of minority populations” (Bell, J., 2020, p.9). Queer people were pitted against communities of colour due to the propaganda that racial minorities were the reason LGBTQ+ people could not achieve the rights they deserved. The equation of increasing queer rights and declining rights for people of colour is a visualisation of violence because when minorities are against one another, those who are truly harmful go uncritiqued. However, “despite powerful conservative pressure on several fronts—indicated by the rightward turn toward family values and against civil rights in the Ronald Reagan era as well as the struggle over gay age of consent laws and racial immigration restriction leading up to the Margaret Thatcher era in Britain— neither of these rightward mobilizations produced a total backlash” (Mumford, K. 2020, p. 118); while two major world powers had homophobic and transphobic law in tandem with racist law, people still fought for the rights of both sexual and racial minorities. This joint fight meant that there was never full resentment between these two communities, allowing mutual ground to be found and queer people of colour to be recognised. Esparza and his work fight for this recognition, being clear in ‘bust: indestructible columns’ due to where the demonstration took place as well the community cultivated around it.

Esparza’s ‘bust: indestructible columns’ visualises violence through the artist being incased in and breaking out of pillar that represents the authorities of the United States. Both performances of this work criticise structures within America; the first LA performance “was a comment on police violence and the sort of surveillance endured by black and brown bodies” (Rafa Esparza, New York Times, 2020) with the second that took place in Washington DC featuring an ionic pillar that mirrored the materials used to make authority buildings such as The White House. This work as well as many of Esparza’s others bring awareness to and fight against deep rooted racism and homophobia within America, creating eye-catching works in prominent spaces as well as building a community to achieve this attention.

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