A SIGHT TO WITHHOLD

David J. Getsy on Cassils

Cassils, *Fountain*, 2017. Performance view, September 16, 2017, Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York. Background: Cassils, *PISSED*, 2017. Photo: Vince Ruvolo.

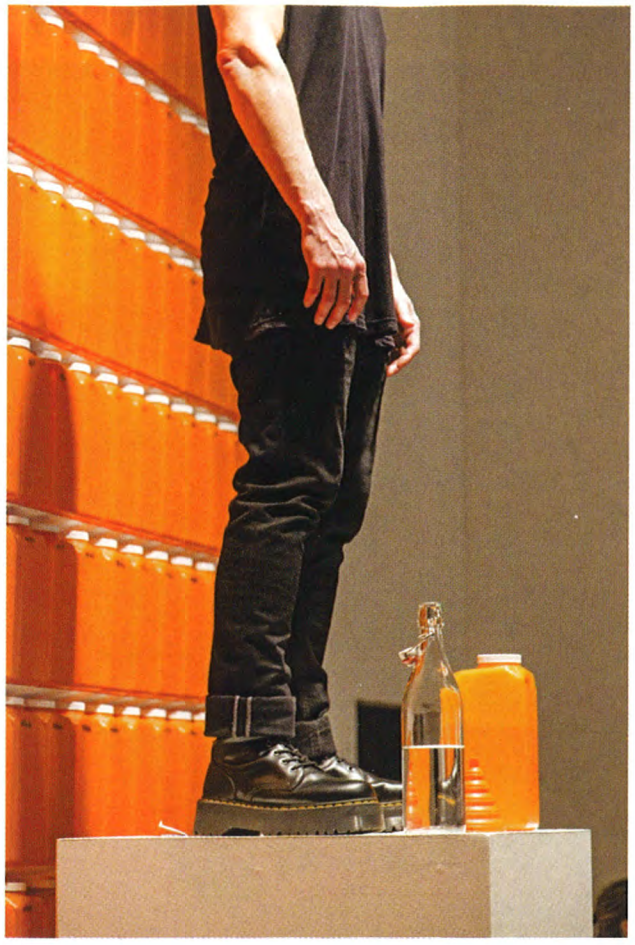
MAKE NO MISTAKE: Cassils's work comes from rage. *PISSED*, the centerpiece of their exhibition "Monumental" at Ronald Feldman Gallery in New York this past autumn, testifies to that anger. Exhibited as a massive glass cube containing two hundred gallons of the artist's urine surrounded by the containers used to collect and carry it, *PISSED* addressed a transgender political struggle via a formal language at once confrontational and uncompromisingly austere. The work was sparked by the Trump administration's spiteful, reactionary decision to rescind an Obama-era executive order that endorsed the rights of transgender students to use the bathroom of the gender they know themselves to be. In response, Cassils began collecting all the urine they passed since that date. Refusing to keep out of sight, the artist undertook this months-long lifework as a confrontational transgression of the conventional lines between public and private, and the resulting installation offered a defiant material presence that resists the ways in which "privacy" has been weaponized against transgender lives.

The fearmongering about bathrooms hinges on compelling trans people to make themselves visible as a means of surveilling and targeting them. This motive is masked as a defense of privacy, the terms of which are defined, narrowly, through the presumption that gender is merely (and strictly) binary, and through the belief that those binary genders need to be segregated because of the dangers of heterosexual lust. Any "right to privacy," however, excludes anyone who does not fit binary preconceptions, and this exclusion is enforced by institutions that defend the myth that there are only two static genders. Bathrooms have become one of the most visible symbols and sites of the structural disenfranchisement of transgender people. *PISSED* makes the case that bodily processes are already public and political.

With *PISSED*, Cassils wryly appropriated the formal vocabulary of Minimalist abstraction, the rule-based structures of Conceptual performance, and the tropes of institutional critique. The work was a daily disruption for the public spaces through which Cassils moved during nearly seven months of urine collection, carrying a conspicuous container with them at all times. The material needs of their body were consequently made both public and social throughout the months leading up to the work's display. This performance work manifested its protest as quotidian visibility, a literal refusal to allow this issue to recede from view—not for a single day. When Cassils was traveling by air or out of the country, friends took on the responsibility of storing their own urine in the artist's stead. What was on view in the gallery is an evidentiary residue of these daily acts of defiance and solidarity, and its final form is built on the thousands of conversations Cassils had with friends, strangers, authorities, and acquaintances about the work and its political significance. Cassils's artistic labor included shouldering the burden of having these conversations (which ranged from the supportive to the skeptical to the antagonistic), as well as enduring the increased scrutiny this performance of resistance brought to them, their body, and its processes.

Cassils speaks to the politics affecting transgender lives while striving to convey those politics without exposing the trans body to voyeuristic examination.

For over fifteen years, Cassils's work in performance, installation, and video has tackled the complicated politics of transgender visibility and its intertwinement with the politics of form. They use their own body as material, transforming it through training, nutrition, and the acquisition of athletic skills, while also exploring the



From left: **Cassils, *Monument Push*, 2017.** Performance view, April 29, 2017, Omaha. Photo: Cassils and Alison Kelly. **Cassils, *Fountain*, 2017.** Performance view, September 16, 2017, Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York. Background: Cassils, *PISSED*, 2017. Photo: Vince Ruvolo. **View of "Cassils: Monumental,"** Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York. Background: *Inextinguishable Fire*, 2007–15. Hanging: *Encapsulated Breaths*, 2017. Photo: Vince Ruvolo.

avoid the presumption of speaking (or standing) for all. Instead, they offer works that—like the traces of touch on the abstract monument or the disembodied voices of the Grimm trials—attempt to open up the complexity of trans experience while calling for visceral identification and political reflection from all viewers.

At the same time, there are moments when Cassils does use their own body in their performance, to visually confront the viewer. Rarely, however, do they offer unfettered visual access to their body. This relates to their long-standing engagement with histories of feminist art, and Cassils builds on and cites the precedents of such artists as Eleanor Antin and Lynda Benglis, both of whom made works that also bravely displayed their bodies to critique the history of representation and its gendered politics. Pivoting between such feminist body art and the capacities of abstraction and fragmentation, Cassils challenges us with the defiant presence of their body. Exposing the artist to the viewer's gaze, such work nevertheless both makes manifest and resists the violence that such visibility can incite. We see this, for example, in "Alchemized," 2017, a series of photographs of Cassils in which their body is covered in gold. These pictures push the body toward abstraction through tight cropping and the monochrome gilt. They invite the gaze but also mock it by turning the spectacularized body into a precious metal—a fragment of a gold statue that, like the famous Oscar statuette, is streamlined to a form that is not easily gendered. While indexing Cassils's body, the photographs, like *Becoming an Image*, also prevent full visual access to it.

Such recourses to abstraction, bodily evocation through sound, or fragmentation are necessary for Cassils's project and politics. No, abstraction is not an escape—but it can be a method of protection or evasion when easy legibility is dangerous or intrusive. There needs to be space both for confrontational politics and for the equally political tactics of nondisclosure and intended unrecognizability. Cassils stages these dual necessities by making overtly political work that does not merely offer itself up to the viewer's wish to see—that is, to identify and to categorize. Their deployment of Minimalist and abstract forms (as well as their vexing of the easy view of the transgender body) is a challenge to the demand that transgender people make themselves visible *for everyone else*.

At the opening of "Monumental," in the performance *Fountain*, 2017, Cassils critically enacted these ideas. Surrounded by the containers and facing the glass cube, they stood (clothed) on a tall pedestal. They drank water constantly and would, on occasion, urinate into another container, to be added to the cube. Attendees waited curiously for this event over the two hours the performance went on. It was a sympathetic crowd, but there was still an anxious buzz in the room when it appeared that the urination was about to happen. This was, in the end, another of Cassils's tactical contradictions. Cassils capitalized on the fascination with the vulnerable act of urinating (and, by extension, with the transgender body) to compel the audience to stare at the artist. For this limited time, Cassils was the monument, high above the crowd. All looked up and waited, vigilant. Cassils understood the audience's gaze (both intrusive and sympathetic) and solicited it as a means of entraining them in a group performance of witnessing and, ultimately, of solidarity.

Cassils's works are protests. They are based in anger and defiance, and they struggle with the realities of the ways in which transgender people are surveilled and controlled. Cassils insists on recognition but refuses to be objectified. The seeming divergences of the works' visual strategies—from spectacular body performance to cerebral abstraction—are required to address today's political realities, when transgender lives are commodified, instrumentalized, and policed for others' comfort. The double bind in political attacks on transgender visibility hinges on the paradoxical demands of being both out of sight and readily identifiable, and Cassils's monuments attest to the many ways in which that visual contradiction is endured and resisted. □

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Left: **Cassils, *Alchemic No. 1*, 2017**, ink-jet print, 30 × 30". From the series "Alchemized," 2017. Photo: Cassils with Robin Black. Above: **Cassils, *Becoming an Image Performance Still, No. 3 (Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Historic Casting Hall)*, 2016**, ink-jet print, 20 × 30". Photo: Cassils with Zachary Hartzell.

body's mediation via photography, video, sound, and sculpture. In some performances and photographs, Cassils has defiantly exposed their body, knowing this will solicit viewers' intrusive gazes and suffering the voyeuristic objectification that many viewers unquestionably perform. The artist does this to short-circuit the lurid, diagnostic fascination that has historically shadowed the visibility of the transgender body. Cassils's work incites voyeurism to subvert it.

"Monumental" situated *PISSED* within the broader context of this practice of resistance, juxtaposing the work with objects related to *Becoming an Image*, 2012–. This ongoing performance centers on Cassils's combat with a two-thousand-pound clay monolith whose originally clean-lined, geometric form has been transformed into a record of the many punches and kicks that have impacted its surface. The audience views it in the dark, surrounded by the sounds of Cassils's exertions. Flashes of light from a photographer's camera allow brief glimpses of Cassils during their attack on this form, leaving viewers with retinal burn rather than the ability to stare at the performer's nude body. The exhibition at Ronald Feldman included some of the photographs taken during these performances, as well as the monument *Resilience of the 20%*, 2016, a bronze cast of the battered clay remnant that obliquely attests to the survival and strength of transgender people in a climate of violence against them. Also on view was documentation of the important performance *Monument Push*, 2017, organized with the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts in Omaha. Here, a group pushed the bronze sculpture through town to sites of resistance and to places where violence against marginalized peoples had occurred. In addition to establishing a platform for public conversations about the suppressed violence of the city's past, *Monument Push* created an indexical record of the effort of those who moved it through the streets of Omaha, the bronze accumulating marks of patination and wear. The work recalls Francis Alÿs's well-known *Paradox of Praxis I*, 1997, for which he pushed a block of ice through the streets of Mexico City as it gradually melted away, but *Monument Push* is less reflexive, more overtly embedded not only in the history of art (Alÿs's work having been widely construed as both a parody of and an elegy for Minimalism) but also in the history of politics, of gender, of the specific place in which the work was situated. And Cassils's performance gets more difficult as it proceeds. The weight does not lessen. If anything, it seems to get heavier. If Alÿs stages the deliquescence of history, Cassils emphasizes its obdurate refusal to go away, or to transform itself into elegant abstraction. Abstraction in *Monument Push* is not elegant, and it is not an escape from anything.

In all of their multistage works, which move from performance to sculpture and installation, Cassils never allows the viewer merely to aestheticize the experience. Visitors did not contemplate *PISSED* in silence; emanating from the speakers in the room was the recorded testimony of the Virginia school board and the Fourth US Circuit Court of Appeals regarding Gavin Grimm, the high school student who sued his school for his right to use the appropriate bathroom. Much of the testimony is negative, and this looping two-hour audio component immersed viewers in the hateful opinions aired in Grimm's presence during the legal proceedings. These disembodied voices of ignorance made it impossible to see Cassils's cube, or the seriality of the containers, in merely formal terms, ensuring that the bodily and political urgency of the work was present and visceral. Sound plays a similar role in Cassils's video installation *Inextinguishable Fire*, 2007–15, in which viewers hear the labored breath of the artist as they are engulfed in flames (while wearing a fire-retardant suit), and in *Becoming an Image*, where the artist's breathing can be heard for the duration of the piece, while their body is only fitfully seen in the camera's flashes.

Across their works, Cassils uses such fragmented or distilled evocations of bodies both to activate physical empathy and to circumvent the visual scrutiny that trans people endure. This is also the case with their use of abstraction (be it in the Minimalist cube or the mottled form of *Resilience of the 20%*). Cassils's work results from a sustained attempt to speak to the larger politics affecting transgender lives while, at the same time, striving to convey those politics without exposing the trans body to voyeuristic examination. In conjunction, these tactics derive from Cassils's understanding that no one body can represent the diversity and complexity of all trans lives. While Cassils uses their own body in their performances, they strategically employ abstraction to