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## Aberrant Shakespeare: Ron Athey's Excesses, Bataille's *Solar Anus*, Becomings-Macbeth

**Abstract:** In this article we argue that Ron Athey's performance *Solar Anus* is an aberrant adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* in which the parodic world of abundant excess that the witches catalyze is redemptively captured and transformed through the playful, androgynous, and excessive performance of Athey, who fulfills the witches' prophecy and continues to live on sovereignly as both *Macbeth* and *Lady Macbeth*. Athey is a Los Angeles-based performance artist who practices what is sometimes called "extreme performance," exploring the limits of aesthetics and the capabilities of the human body to express both beauty and pain. His work *Solar Anus* draws on the works of Georges Bataille, especially his short essay-poem, *Solar Anus*, as well as Paul Molinier, a queer French painter and visual artist who worked on the fringes of the surrealist movement. We work through the combined sociopolitical theory, performance aesthetics, and research methodology of transversal poetics and engage especially with the theories and explorations of aesthetics and sovereignty by Georges Bataille and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in order to explore the ways in which Athey is capable of realizing the witches' prophecy of sovereignty without being destroyed by the parodic world that they create and inhabit. Alongside the concepts of sovereignty, we examine how Bataille's ideas of parody, sacrifice, and excess offer new ways of understanding the world of *Macbeth* and how excess and sovereignty both function within its porous borders.

**Keywords:** Shakespeare, Adaptation, Ron Athey, Transversal, Care, Surrealism, *Macbeth*, Bataille, Molinier, Deleuze.

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## Excesses of Shakespace

Within and through the historically roiling *articulatory space* of Shakespeare, which is to say, *Shakespace*, surprising assemblages occasionally emerge. Articulatory spaces are fluid multifaceted, primarily abstract, spatiotemporal realms in which ideational streams, discourses, and performances negotiate and aggregate meanings, redefine their trajectories, boundaries, and strategies while orbiting and informing subjects of critical speculation. Shakespace is a particularly powerful articulatory space that intersects with many other articulatory spaces related to or within subjects, events, and themes within popular culture, politics, history, feminism, post-colonialism, Marxism, Christianity, cyberspace, academia, and so on. In effect, Shakespace is often *autopoietic* within the discourses through which it flows and between the various articulatory spaces as it becomes complexly generative and expansively playful.<sup>1</sup>

When autopoietic, Shakespace produces adaptations and parodies of itself within itself. These sometimes appear as *aberrant variations* of official and institutionally accepted articulations of Shakespeare's work. Such aberrant variations are often dismissed as farfetched, absurd or unimportant, and thus relegated to the margins of the official territories occupying and operative within Shakespace. And yet they are used by certain official territories in subversion/containment fashion to reinforce its boundaries, which is to say, subversive activity is encouraged by *state machinery*—the singular and plural, amalgamated, dynamic interchange of state-supporting forces—only so that dominant structures can demonstrate their repressive power by ultimately suppressing it. *Official territory* is networked state machinery, ruling devices and properties within a society (*sociopolitical conductors*, systems for knowledge transfer, governmental and cultural structures, etc.), whether majorly comprised of dominant cultural components or minoritarian of a subculture or specific institution, that fuse and laminate overlap among subjective territories and provide the rationale, infrastructure, and parameters for that society. In contrast, aberrant variations generate innovative nodals, that is, surprising indeterminate points of connectivity, conduction, and potential on which innumerable themes, subjects, identities, characters, and aesthetics of Shakespace can be noodled—improvised and theorized on to create and cocreate new nodals on which to

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<sup>1</sup> Francisco Varela and Humberto Maturana coined the term “autopoiesis” to describe the self-maintenance of cells. It was later adapted by Niklas Luhmann for his systems theory as a way to explain the feedback loops he describes and observes within social phenomena. Here we are informed by its many uses and use it especially to the way in which articulatory spaces are generative within a complex feedback-loop and feed-forward flow with subjective, conceptual, official, and transversal territories.

stabilize or noodle further, however viscerally, intellectually, and electrically (in short, *viscerally*).

Aberrant variations frequently conduct and transform excesses of Shakespace into parodic cosmos like the Shakespearean universe of Troma Entertainment and their films circumnavigating within it, like *Tromeo and Juliet* and *Shakespeare's Shitstorm* in dynamism with *The Toxic Avenger* and *Sgt. Kabukiman*, or Andrew Fleming's *Hamlet 2* (in which Jesus and Hamlet team up to go back in time to save Ophelia), or in The Wooster Group's theatrical adaptations of *Hamlet* (spectrally spoofing John Gielgud's 1964 production with Richard Burton) and *Troilus and Cressida* (*Cry Trojans!*—featuring native Americans played by white people) or in Taylor Mac's "fabulous" sequel to *Titus Andronicus*, *Gary: A Sequel to Titus Andronicus*. Such *viscerally* play operates through the framework of parody that Georges Bataille explains in his essay-poem, "Solar Anus." Parody inverts the order of things and then disarticulates hierarchies such that values become only ephemerally emergent and aleatory—Bataille's "base materialism"—a kind of Bakhtinian "carnavalesque" in which the high and the low, the sun and the anus, sashay in a destabilizing dance of limitless possibility.

Ron Athey's controversial performance, *Solar Anus*, resounds, for us, as an aberrant variation of *Macbeth*, an auto-poetically emergent property of Shakespace mashed up with Bataillespace and productively haunted by the complementarily aberrant, and thus elided, articulatory space of visual artist/photographer Pierre Molinier, famous for his fetishistic composites of erotic imagery. The parodic world of abundant excess that *Macbeth's* Witches catalyze is redemptively captured and transformed through the androgynous expressing, asymptotically transgender performance of Athey. He fulfills the Witches' prophecy and continues to live on as a processual singularity, a Deleuzoguattarian "double-capture" of combined Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. Athey's is not a utopic redemption, but is instead an immanent one that allows for a playful, if often brutally beautiful, existence within a parodic world of base materialism that does away with the idealist concepts and practices characteristic of official territory. This *immanent redemption* ironically also allows for the radical sovereignty that the Macbeths so desperately seek, which allows Athey's character to become anything and everything he desires, including and not limited to both king and queen.

The *performative redemption* of and as the Macbeths by Athey occurs through parody and through care—care as parody and parody as care insofar as the puncture and penetration of his own body as performance is an act of self-care—however parodic it may seem—an act of care for a community that is both imagined and real, and an act of care of and for reality at the limits of the *unexperienceable experience* (non-computable via available registers for

comprehension).<sup>2</sup> Here, care follows a parodic logic that is strange, especially in the context of Bataille for whom excess is parody or sacrifice: parody insofar as meaning, value, recognition, and other forms of extension are unstable because “each thing is the parody of another, or is the same thing in a deceptive form” and sacrifice insofar as there is always an “accursed share”—an excess of energy—that must be expended in some way through sacrifice (“Solar Anus” 5). For Bataille, the accursed share is the excessive part of exchange in an economy that cannot be recuperated back into the system and must be sacrificed. Yet such sacrifice can be controlled. For instance, the frivolity of art is an expenditure, a sacrifice, of resources towards no clear purpose that transmutes excess energy. Sacrifice can also be out of control and can occur through violence, war, and destructive gift-giving.

The creation of and participation in frivolity and art themselves become stabilizing forces within this model. Such stabilization is an act of care within and for the system and those that belong to it. At the same time, however, frivolity and art are necessarily unstable and not practical because they demand a type of sacrifice which is always in relation to excess and its inherent, uncontrollable forces of destabilization. Excess, even if delimited by frivolity and art, will always push the boundaries of a system until it breaks. Consider, for instance, attempts by sociopolitical conductors (scholars, teachers, theater makers) to contain the excesses of Shakespace through institutional codification that must constantly adapt and expand because of Shakespace’s proliferative autopoiesis and persistent inability to successfully map out its ever-shifting poetic terrain. Shakespeare’s poetry, to be sure, precipitates particularly playful indeterminacy to meanings across history and cultures that ensures variability.

Ironically, rather than excess energy, when applied to sacrifice, parody, which is the other form of excess for Bataille, performs another type of double-capture through a feed-back loop that feeds forward. The parody of sacrifice—whether of art and frivolity or catastrophe or both—destabilizes the destabilizing and in doing so both contains it and produces further excess that might continue to be aestheticized through acts of parodic sacrifice as *care-through-parody* and then *parody-through-care* that produce an aestheticized reality that vibrates with relational intensity. There is a double capture through a symbiosis between the two functions that maintain the transformative power of their relational intensity.

In other essays, we have defined the engagement with and performance of such a reality as *allo-realism*. Allo-realism prioritizes the intensity of difference over the extension of difference—the relationship between affects, experiences,

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<sup>2</sup> Explicitly or implicitly in conversation with queer, punk, mental health, and extreme performance communities, Ron Athey’s works emerged in part as a response to the trauma and devastation of the AIDS crisis.

and changes in the aesthetic production of realism over signs, values, and meanings that produce a coherent and recognizable aesthetic of realism. Allo-realism helps us understand the parodic realities of Athey and *Macbeth* that go seemingly beyond and in-excess of what is sustainable, meaningful, and coherent—positively making aberrant sense, indeed something remarkable, of the “tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing” (5.5.29-31).

### **Ron Athey's *Solar Anus***

Athey's *Solar Anus* is a performance that directly engages with Bataille's “Solar Anus” as well as the work of fellow controversial and outcast surrealist artist Pierre Molinier, who famously photographed and cut up images of himself as a woman. Like Bataille, Molinier was rejected by the head of the surrealist movement, André Breton, who at first embraced him and organized the only exhibition of Molinier's paintings during his lifetime. Molinier's photographs, which feature him dressed in women's clothing (especially black stockings), wearing high heels, with focus on his anus, and penetrating himself with a dildo, were overly transgressive for the surrealist group. In his photographs, Molinier uses a cut-up method to portray himself as both a man and a woman, to multiply legs, faces, buttocks, anuses, and bodies—often creating kaleidoscopic images that both depict and play with fetishistic iconography. In Molinier, Athey sees “true fetishism” and throughout *Solar Anus*, Athey pays homage to Molinier by recreating his images and using them as inspiration to play with and enfold gender like Molinier (Johnson 34).

Throughout *Solar Anus*, with measured suspense, Athey methodically transforms himself. Especially significant in *Solar Anus*, as we move on to the ways in which Athey becomes the Macbeths by way of Bataille and Molinier, are certain expressive actions: 1) Athey removes a long string of pearls from his anus around which is tattooed a sun, a tribute to Bataille's “Solar Anus.” 2) He dons a golden crown that also has fishhooks that pull back—and cat-like feminizes—the skin on his eyes and cheeks after which he ceremonially powders his face and becomes a beautiful queen. 3) He repeatedly thrusts a dildo attached to his stiletto heels into himself, partially in reference to Molinier's photographs in which he similarly penetrates his anus with homemade dildos made from stuffed silk stockings that are attached to a high-heeled shoe. Through Athey's performance of this image, his body, as Dominic Johnson points out, “becomes the site of ‘scandalous eruption’ in performance” and brings to life Bataille's parodic vision of base materialism. 4) Athey pulls his scrotum over his penis and stitches it up so that his penis is enveloped within its fold; as a result, he becomes visibly without a penis.



Image 1: Pierre Molinier, Je suis content, variante, tirage argentique d'époque © Artcurial



Image 2: Solar Anus, Pearls, Courtesy of Ron Athey

In an interview during which Athey is getting a sun tattooed around his anus, he says that by getting the tattoo, he is “transforming something private and filthy into something glamorous and even burlesque in a way.” The tattoo, he jokes, is “a very burlesque tattoo because it does tricks.” There are multiple levels to Athey’s anal burlesque. The transformation and play between filth and glamour performs Bataille’s base materialism symbolically, literally enacting the solar anus. The enactment of the solar anus and the performance of eruption made possible by it on Athey’s body also crystallizes base materialism within an aesthetic, thus capturing the unstable position of base materialism as both high and low, thereby articulating it and destabilizing its unstable position while simultaneously destabilizing recognizable or common forms of the aesthetic.

Athey does not capture the excess. He channels it and enacts a careful coexistence with excess that allows its survival. Consider how Athey opens *Solar Anus* by removing a long string of pearls from his tattooed solar anus, essentially performing a carefully orchestrated, scandalous eruption. Needless to say, a careful scandalous eruption is contradictory. What might it mean to scandalously erupt with care? What is a careful eruption? Is it one that is theatricalized and presented to an audience for interpretation and meaning-making

as Amelia Jones argues?<sup>3</sup> Does it also open up opportunities to move beyond meaning-making to engage in excess and frivolity with Athey and with each other—allowing the excess (erotic, social, artistic, political, etc.) to circulate while still destabilizing common and official forms of aesthetics and meaning-making?

Jones argues, “Athey in this way indeed embodies and enacts the radical potential to create intersubjective bonds that nurture social and political awareness of suffering as both personal and collective” (157). Athey’s careful scandalous eruption, however, goes beyond nurturing social and political awareness. It normalizes and celebrates fetishism and suffering—transforming the excesses of both unproductive sexuality and pain into something immanent and legitimate, a successful humanity. It also allows for Athey to perform the approximation of sovereignty over his own body as Bataille describes it. For Bataille, sovereignty is the capacity to be in and enjoy the present without thought towards the future or the past. He writes, “What is sovereign in fact is to enjoy the present time without having anything else in view but this present time” (*The Accursed Share* 199). Hence, sovereignty is also a ceasings-to-be, a becomings-imperceptible.<sup>4</sup> While ceasings-to-be is related to death for Bataille,

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<sup>3</sup> Amelia Jones writes: “Presented as ‘art,’ Athey’s action is ‘parodic,’ in Bataille’s sense (for Athey, Bataille’s idea of the ‘solar anus’ exposes ‘the magic tricks inherent in the anus’); but in contrast to Bataille’s version, Athey’s elicits rather than eschews an emotionally charged interpretation. It opens the performer’s body to the audience so that we must give meaning to this body in the durational moments of our proximity to these sounds, images and smells. It does this, as I will argue below, through its exaggerated engagement of spectacle. As Athey has noted, ‘in my performance material, I am guilty of enhancing my history, situation and surroundings into a perfectly depicted apocalypse, or at least a more visual atrocity;’ Athey’s work is always visually, aurally, and otherwise excessive and theatrical” (156).

<sup>4</sup> Bataille writes: “The thought that comes to a halt in the face of what is sovereign rightfully pursues its operation to the point where its object dissolves into NOTHING, because ceasing to be useful, or subordinate, it becomes *sovereign* in ceasing to be” (*The Accursed Share* 204). On becoming-imperceptible, Deleuze and Guattari write: “To be present at the dawn of the world. Such is the link between imperceptibility, indiscernibility, and impersonality—the three virtues. To reduce oneself to an abstract line, a trait, in order to find one’s zone of indiscernibility with other traits, and in this way enter the haecceity and impersonality of the creator. One is then like grass: one has made the world, everybody/everything, into a becoming, because one has made a necessarily communicating world, because one has suppressed in oneself everything that prevents us from slipping between things and growing in the midst of things. One has combined “everything” (*le “tout”*): the indefinite article, the infinitive-becoming, and the proper name to which one is reduced. Saturate, eliminate, put everything in” (280). Though Deleuze and Guattari write in terms of abundance while Bataille writes in terms of negation, the idea of nothing that Bataille articulates is close to Deleuze and Guattari’s idea of imperceptibility insofar as nothing for Bataille is about escaping usefulness and subordination, or otherwise escaping a system or organization, or the systems and organization that the idea of being imposes on becoming.



it is ultimately a becomings that demands an unknowing. It is what we describe as *goings-x* through and beyond the unexperienceable experience in the chaotic spacetime of transversal territory; indeed, echoing ominously with imperceptibility.



Image 3: Solar Anus, Crown, Courtesy of Ron Athey

In the process of enacting sovereignty, Athey dons a crown that pulls back the skin of his eyes and cheeks with corded fish hooks, and then he powders his face, becomings-autocratic perceptibly to the audience by way of becomings-woman, becomings-androgynous, becomings-sovereign, becomings-imperceptible, goings-transversal. But before we consider the crown, let us consider the beads and the bubbles as we turn to *Macbeth*.

### Clutching Pearls, Popping Bubbles

Terry Eagleton argues that the Witches are the heroines of *Macbeth* because they expose a social order that depends on oppression and incessant warfare while delusionally justifying both as necessary for the stability of the state. The Witches exist outside of this system along its borders as creative and intensive—a multiplicity that has creative and transformative power. Stephen Greenblatt writes that “the Witches in *Macbeth* are constructed on the boundaries between hallucination and spiritual reality and between fantasy and fact, the border or the

membrane where the imagination and the corporeal world, figure and actuality, psychic disturbance and objective truth meet" (193). They are the "bubbles" that Banquo describes, "The earth hath bubbles, as the water has, and these are of them" (1.3.82-83). At the border, in a constant state of becomings, they are destabilizing and parodic themselves. Eagleton points out that they are "Androgynous (bearded women), multiple (three-in-one) and 'imperfect speakers', the Witches strike at the stable social, sexual, and linguistic forms which the society of the play needs in order to survive" (Eagleton 2). At the same time, they form an intensive and creative community of their own that is capable of absorbing all the solar energy to ride the waves of base materialism—pure excess—that destabilizes Macbeth's world and overturns the order of things through irony. "Fair is foul, and foul is fair" such that the ground itself, as Banquo points out, bubbles, and is therefore ungrounded with becomings and metamorphosis (1.1.12).

The bubbles scandalously erupt like Athey's string of pearls from his anus. At work here is, as we have said, a careful scandalous eruption as well as the irony of the *fair-becomings-foul* and the *foul-becomings-fair*: the topsyturvy, playful becomings-woman of homosexuality and androgyny (the string of pearls as a symbol of femininity and evocative of semen), and the imperfect speech of the act (defying singular and common interpretation). The pearls emerge also already from a membrane (in Greenblattian terms) that is the porous border between the inside and outside of Athey's body (his anus) and symbolically from a liminal space that is often taboo. The act itself aestheticizes and acts out a beautiful transgression: the anus absorbing the sun's energy tattooed around it and excreting beauty from the excess.

When the weird sisters speak their prophecy, they contaminate Macbeth with their excess. Eagleton writes: "They perform a 'deed without a name,' and Macbeth's own actions, once influenced by them, become such that 'Tongue nor heart/Cannot conceive nor name.' The physical fluidity of the three sisters becomes inscribed in Macbeth's own restless desire, continually pursuing the pure being of kingship but at each step ironically unravelling that very possibility" (2). Lady Macbeth is also contaminated by that excess and fluidity in her desirous masculinity, her sleeplessness (excess of energy), and suicide (sacrifice and expenditure of excess in Bataille's terms). Unlike Athey, who aestheticizes the bubbles while maintaining the instability of his own position in his trajectory of becomings-woman, becomings-androgynous, becomings-imperceptible, the Macbeth's are incapable of containing or channeling the excess in large part because the more they chase sovereignty, the less of it they have.

This is especially true of Macbeth, who does not have the state power he desires at the beginning of the play but is himself excessive and only partially captured by the state—a harnessed and deployed *war machine*. A war machine, as Deleuze and Guattari describe it, is exterior to the state and is itself

exteriority. It resists the organs and organization of the state even as it may be captured by the state. Richard III, for instance, is an example of a war machine that Deleuze and Guattari offer in "Treatise on Nomadology":

Shakespeare's kings could also be invoked: even violence, murders, and perversion do not prevent the State lineage from producing "good" kings; but a disturbing character like Richard III slips in, announcing from the outset his intention to reinvent a war machine and impose its line (deformed, treacherous, and traitorous, he claims a "secret close intent" totally different from the conquest of State power, and another—an other—relation with women). (354)

*Macbeth* is closely related to *Richard III*, as commonly observed, and it is a humanity and guilt, a becomings-subject, that is introduced in *Macbeth* that separates the two characters of Richard III and Macbeth.<sup>5</sup> Macbeth is a captured war machine and forgets, as it becomes too late to remember, that he is outside of the state in his own quest to embody and become the state.

As a war machine excessive and exterior to the state, Macbeth has more sovereignty as Bataille understands it. Macbeth exists in the present as pure and excessive violence: "For brave Macbeth (well he deserves that name), / Disdaining Fortune, with his brandished steel, Which smoked with bloody execution / Like Valor's minion, carved out his passage" (1.2.17-21). He disdains fortune—not subject to his fate or his future, and he acts assuredly and violently in the present, embracing his sovereignty as a war-machine.

It is only when the Witches contaminate Macbeth with "supernatural soliciting" that he begins to lose his sovereignty and becomes a manager of excess rather than an agent of excess. As a manager of excess, he begins to repress thoughts for anticipation and fear of the future. He soliloquies to the audience: "My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical, / Shakes so my single state of man / That function is smothered in surmise, / And nothing is but what is not" (1.2.152-155). He both murders his thought of murdering the king and plans the murder which "yet is but fantastical," anticipating that it perhaps might not be. In both murdering his thought and planning murder, he becomes stuck and unable to act in the present. He can only act in and based on an imagined and anticipated future—a *future-present-space*—imperfectly and excessively prophesied by the Witches. His thinking exceeds his action, and in that moment he loses his sovereignty because he becomes a subject to an imagined future and to the image of his own thought.

Howard Marchitello convincingly argues that, "Macbeth's violent and frenetic actions are less the consequences of a certain pathology and more

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<sup>5</sup> See especially Fred Manning Smith, "The Relation of Macbeth to Richard the Third" (1945, *PMLA*).

a manifestation of what it means to exist in a world radically accelerated towards a mode of being (Virilio would say a ‘milieu’) in which temporality collapses into functional instantaneity” (433).<sup>6</sup> The “functional instantaneity” here refers to Paul Virilio’s idea of real-time, which is not the present but is instead a collapsing of spacetime into the illusion of instantaneity—both too fast to anticipate and too fast to act on. Within such a time, one is still subject to the future but ultimately unable to act in the present, which is always happening too quickly. As Marchitello points out, Lady Macbeth collapses the future into the present directly when speaking to Macbeth: “Thy letters have transported me beyond / This ignorant present, and I feel now / The future in the instant” (1.5.63-65). In doing so, much like Macbeth who is suspended now in the anticipated future of prophecy, she also becomes suspended in that prophecy and, in fact, becomes another motor of Macbeth’s action that is always already subject to the image of his own thought captured by the structures of the state. In imagining a future sovereignty, the Macbeths inscribe themselves within *official territory* and call upon their understandings of *state machinery* in order to become sovereign—thus forgetting their present-becomings and the necessity for the sovereign to be outside of official territory insofar as the sovereign subjective territory becomes the border of the state.

Lady Macbeth’s excessiveness extends desirously into her unstable gender identity. Upon reading Macbeth’s letter and learning of the Witches’ prophecy as well as his uncertainty, she famously invokes, “Come, you spirits / That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here, / And fill me from the crown to the toe topfull / Of direst cruelty! Make thick my blood; / Stop up the access and passage to remorse / That no compunctious visitings of nature / Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between the effect and it!” (1.5.47-54). She wants to become cruel and impenetrable, equating emotion with penetration as well as her menstruation. Though the passage is often read as her desiring to be masculine, as Stephanie Chamberlain explains with fascinating historical contextualization, Lady Macbeth also has a maternal identity, even as a murdering mother.<sup>7</sup> As a murdering mother, as Janet Adelman astutely argues through the object-relational lens of psychoanalytic feminism, she spreads her evil through her milk, and where there is evil there is uncertainty.<sup>8</sup> Hence, she spreads instability

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<sup>6</sup> Marchitello cites and echoes also Donald W. Foster’s idea that Macbeth is at war with time.

<sup>7</sup> See “Fantasizing Infanticide: Lady Macbeth and the Murdering Mother in Early Modern England” in *College Literature* 32.3 (Summer, 2005): 72-91, 82.

<sup>8</sup> See Janet Adelman’s “Born of Woman’: Fantasies of Maternal Power in *Macbeth*” in *Cannibals, Witches, and Diverse: Estranging the Renaissance* edited by Marjorie Garber.

like the Witches. However, she strategizes towards her own stability unlike the Witches, who embody becomings and instability within which they revel.

Invoking the image of the murdering mother, Lady Macbeth questions her husband's masculinity, undermining his gender identity negatively rather than affirmatively:

What beast was't, then,  
That made you break this enterprise to me?  
When you durst do it, then you were a man;  
And, to be more than what you were, you would  
Be so much more the man. Nor time nor place  
Did then adhere, and yet you would make both:  
They have made themselves, and that their fitness now  
Does unmake you. I have given such, and know  
How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me;  
I would, while it was smiling in my face,  
Have pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums,  
And dash'd the brains out, had I so sworn as you  
Have done to this. (1.7.53-67)

The unmaking of Macbeth echoes Lady Macbeth's unsexing, and more importantly, time and space unmake him—his inability to act at the right time and place is his undoing.<sup>9</sup> In other words, he resists parameterized becomings, comings-to-be a beast, according to Lady Macbeth. Ironically, if he were to embrace his becomings-animal within the parameters of his promise, then he would have perhaps been able make time and space rather than be unmade by it. Lady Macbeth, however, asserts that she would have acted on her promise and thus would not have been unmade by time and space, claiming her sovereignty as an actor in a future-present, or a present framed by a promise. Her sovereignty, she understands, would need to pass through a becomings-monstrous in singular pursuit of actualizing her promise and thus making spacetime together—imposing their intersubjective spacetime found in the virtual promise upon official territory and thus mapping their combined subjective territories over the official territory of the state. Macbeth loses his sovereignty, as Bataille understands it, when he is unable to act. He is unable to act in the present and thus unable to create spacetime. He also loses his sovereignty in the sense that his inability to act keeps him from attaining the crown that would officially make him sovereign in the eyes of the state machinery. When Lady Macbeth chastises and upstages him, she articulates his

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<sup>9</sup> For a conversation on the making of time and space see "Physics Divined: The Science of Calvin, Hooker, and Macbeth" by Kristen Poole in *South Central Review* 26.1/2, *Shakespeare & Science* (2009): 127-152, 145-146.

failure to make spacetime while simultaneously destabilizing his masculinity, humanity, and sovereignty as defined by official territory. In doing so, nevertheless, she also undermines the order of things that she implicitly subscribes to in her pursuit of becoming the head of state without changing the state machinery (including institutions that uphold gender norms) that preserve the state's existence.

Like the Witches with whom she is often grouped, Lady Macbeth is excessive and destabilizing in her wished-for androgyny. The destabilization of gender identity moves along parallel to the destabilization of the order of things in which state machinery protects sovereignty in all its forms: despotic and legislative. Still, gender instability in the form that it appears in with the Macbeths is not dangerous to the state. In fact, they wish to maintain the state, and the gender performances that they fail or succeed at only matter to them relative to their mission to be the heads of state. In contrast, the Witches are androgynous and queer outside of the state, on its borders, with no desire to be a part of it or oppose it beyond interfering with it through their machinations. Meaning, the danger to the state is not the instability of rule but exteriority itself, which does not respect interiority or the prolongation of structure.

### **Transducing Sovereignty**

This brings us back to Athey's careful scandalous eruption and its delicate pearl bubbles that signify the instability of any structure: Bataille's base materialism. When he dons his crown, pulls back the skin of his cheeks and eyes, and powders his face, he becomes the Macbeths as they could be: sovereign in their androgyny and successful threats to the state that do not succumb to the guilt of transgression or the subjugation to pasts and futures. Athey transduces the Macbeths' sexual-gender instability in their quest for sovereignty into a careful sovereignty of the present that embraces gender instability and the becomings-imperceptible that true sovereignty demands. Moreover, he transduces Lady Macbeth's open eyes and shut senses into a beautiful hyper-awake and hyper-sensual drag face-head all too aware of the hooks of the crown tugging at its skin.

The transduction of the Macbeths' excess continues by Athey as he converts violent penetration into parodic pleasure engaged with Molinier's fetishistic play and cut-up photographs. Lady Macbeth wishes to be impenetrable. Macbeth is penetrated. His head is severed by Macduff who is "untimely ripp'd" from his mother's womb and thus does not breach the world, for he is not of "one of woman born." By caesarian section, his mother is penetrated for him to invasively be brought out into the world rather than his presence penetrating the world. The cesarian comings-into-the-world is a passive entry, while a vaginal birth is an active one. No penetration, penetration, no

penetration—enacting a Bataillean multiplicity of copulation: “A man gets up as brusquely as a specter in a coffin and falls in the same way. / He gets up a few hours later and then he falls gain, and the same thing happens every day; this great coitus with the celestial atmosphere is regulated by the terrestrial rotation around the sun” (“Solar Anus” 7). Whereas for Bataille this is a heterosexual copulation—“the male shaft penetrating the female and almost entirely emerging, in order to re-enter”—it is not necessary for the multiplicity of penetration to have a particular sexuality as an extensive set of characteristics (“Solar Anus” 7). Instead, a multiplicity is always intensive, characterized by the relations and tensions of the multiplicity.



Image 4: Solar Anus, Dildo, Courtesy of Ron Athey

Mediated by Molinier, Athey performs this multiplicity of penetration as he carefully and then violently inserts a dildo attached to his stiletto shoe into his anus, butt to the audience, while wearing his sovereign crown. In doing so, Athey can act out the penetrative multiplicity of *Macbeth*, which ultimately bolsters the authority of the state through subversion and containment that requires the Macbeths' deaths, exterior to the state in the bubbling realm of the Witches through the capture and aestheticization of base materialism. In this way, he can keep his usurper's head, even as he might embody Andre Masson's

rendition of Bataille's *Acéphale*—a man in excess of reason—and still set the time free. Here, the time is not free because the time of the state is restored in the way that Macduff means it. Here, time is free because he is truly sovereign over it: he enacts pleasure and violence in a careful scandalous eruption again, and again, and again.

## Suturing Macbeths

First introduced by Jacques-Alain Miller in “Suture: Elements of the Logic of the Signifier” and later made to be a staple of film theory, *suture* is a concept that describes the relationship between the lack and the structure, or the way in which a subject identifies themselves with a structure and sutures themselves into it. This functions as a sort of emplacement within narrative. Suture requires intersubjectivity and speaks to the porousness and instability of a subject while also pointing to the ways in which a subject becomes integrated into a discursive reality mediated by other subjects. That intersubjectivity, nevertheless, is predicated on lack.<sup>10</sup>

This type of lack-based intersubjectivity is evident in the relationship between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. Throughout the play, Macbeth fails in their plan for him to become King. During each of his failures, Lady Macbeth must step in. She pushes Macbeth to better commit to the murder of Duncan. She chastises him for not following their original plan. She smears the King's blood on the guards while Macbeth is shaken. She covers for Macbeth at the banquet and then chastises him for confusing the guests. She continues to fill in for Macbeth's shortcomings until she herself is subsumed by guilt and the excess of their act. As Marchitello argues, Macbeth also sutures himself back into conversations through excuses of forgetfulness, though there are gaps of time when he is elsewhere in a vision or in thought. Together, they attempt to suture a sovereign identity into the state by covering over the flights into vision and apparition, the excesses of uncertainty, and the instability of their gender performances and desires within the confines of their quest for sovereignty within the state. Lady Macbeth's sleepless psychosis and eventual death then ushers in Macbeth's own unravelling and the dissolution of any coherence he may have imagined into the nonsense of “sound and fury, signifying nothing” (5.5.27-28).

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<sup>10</sup> Not all uses of suture as a metaphor are predicated on lack. Gayatri Spivak, for instance, sees suturing as a method of rearranging desire through education and suturing cultural fabrics. For Derrida suture is a metaphor for a questionable forgiveness that eschews that logical aporia of forgiving the unforgivable.



In his aberrant variation, Athey's suturing is of a different embodied order. It remains intersubjective if we consider the multiplicity of characters that Athey manifests and contains as a one-person *Macbeth* and the relationships we have established especially between Macbeth, Lady Macbeth, the Witches, and Macduff. Athey sutures his scrotum over his penis. This type of suturing is not predicated on lack or on erasure. Like the Witches, Athey's penis is still present within the molded and stitched skin though it is no longer visible. The sutures remain visible as does Athey's scrotum. That is, there is no covering or smoothing over. The process of suturing and the sutures themselves remain hyper-present for Athey and for the audience. Instead of a covering up, or a healing of a wound, gap, or lack, Athey's suture—the taut uneven line of dark-threaded stitches—emphasizes transformation, transmutation, and transfiguration.

Athey does not fail through excessive masculinity driven to power, or a lack of masculinity contained by humanistic state power, or monstrous femininity and motherhood, or an inability to remain and act fully in the present. He metamorphoses into sovereignty by transmuting excess into aesthetics and transfiguring sovereignty itself into pure sovereignty exterior to the state, outside of future and past, contained only in the instant of the Witches' bubbles. In doing so, he is able to ride-out the excess of the Witches without hiding from it, or attempting to control, contain, or deny it. He enacts and embodies the scandalous eruption of base materialism that parodies the presence of suture through excess instead of lack.

Athey's aberrant variation of *Macbeth* immanently redeems the Macbeths and channels and parameterizes the Witches' excess through performance and aesthetics. Such an aberrant variation is auto-poetic insofar as it transduces the excess of Witches and then performs a variation of *Macbeth* in which the Macbeths' sovereignty is redeemed. Further, it functions as an allo-realistic production of *Macbeth* that emphasizes intensity over extension in the intensive-extensive interplay of realism. Through *visceralletric* performance of Bataille's concepts as they flow over the bubbling spacetimes of Shakespace à la Pierre Molinier, Athey enacts the tensions and multiplicities always already playing out within the world of *Macbeth*. At the same time, like most aberrant variations and the allo-realistic performances that they often engender, Athey's *Solar Anus* offers insights into the arrangements of the multiplicities found in *Macbeth* and the ways by which excess, power, performance, and sovereignty motor through the negotiations of identity with which *Macbeth* wrestles and the virtual nodals of Shakespace on which its characters and audiences noodle. The Witches are still out there, and Athey playfully dances with them on the bubbling earth under the sun whose intensities we extensively follow and whose intensive realities we perform.

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