
CASSILS: WHO BY FIRE

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DOMINIC JOHNSON

Cassils works through, rethinks, critiques and remakes the history of art – and through it, they invoke a history of how power is distributed unevenly across different kinds of bodies. This drive is motivated in part by Cassils's own trans identity, and by an acute political awareness of inequity and injustice – including, centrally, the way discrimination makes people unsafe.

Cassils's work is a sustained encounter with histories of violence. Rather than directly representing or reproducing that which is intolerable (as one might in war photography or history painting), Cassils seeks with seemingly forensic precision to frame, strategically amplify, or mythologise the fact of violence: to measure – even, perhaps, to lessen – the hurt that violence engenders on the bodies of its targets. Their performances, sculptures and installations are ghosted by – that is, they remind me of – the bodies of trans folk subject under attack (from individual aggressors or the nation), Black people pushed by inequity to riot, or migrants criminalised by their passage from state to state. The artist's imperative to see and feel the struggle in the performing body therefore requires a critical apprehension of how violence takes more socially tolerable (often administrative) forms, as racism, misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, xenophobia, and class bias. The ubiquity and protean mobility of social injustice's prevailing forms – how, that is, individuals and groups are hated, and made to suffer, and how we come to find redemption, agency or a glimpse of freedom – perhaps prompts or necessitates Cassils's own therianthrope or shapeshifting nature as an artist. Their need to move promiscuously across forms pulls them between or across performance, sculpture, photography, video, site-specific art, sound installation, and collaborative or participatory art practices – often towards hybrid, seemingly uncategorisable ways of making art. Throughout, their commitment to remaking art as a living, breathing, thinking thing spins on three complementary axes: the *social* (people come together); and the *corporeal* (the body – theirs, or the bodies of proxies – appears to be central); and the *sensory* (the production of a spectacle that compels its audience, visually and aurally, and sometimes in a tactile way). A telling example is *The Resilience of the 20%* (2012), a massive bronze casting of a block of clay sculpted by blows as a monument to murdered transgender people. Rather than installing the monument permanently (in which case, should it overcome the administrative violence of institutional transphobia and be installed, it might be subject to vandalism), Cassils arranged for the sculpture to be moved through public places as the durational, participatory work *Monument Push* (2017). Cassils and a group of LGBT people in Omaha, Nebraska pushed the block of bronze – weighing around one tonne – through Omaha's streets, stopping at sites meaningful to the individuals, or to the fight for sexual and gender autonomy in the city. Notably, Cassils does not exempt themselves from systems of inequity and entitlement: the works tend to retain a sense of the artist's own inevitable complicity, not least as a white person of relative privilege, which prevents their works from appearing righteous, messianic, or trite.

A signature aspect of Cassils's approach to making art often involves distinct references to earlier works by iconic artists: Yves Klein, Eleanor Antin, Lynda Benglis, Harun Farocki, Carolee Schneemann, Peter Berlin, or Ron Athey, for example. When Cassils investigates art-historical precedents, working them through by way of their body, the results are never 'art about art,' that interminable endgame associated with postmodernism at the height of its apolitical self-reflexivity; neither are they reperformances or 're-dos', in the sense of faithful copies or re-enactments, which

tend to valorise or otherwise confirm the canonicity or pre-eminence of the 'original'. To my eye, Cassils's reworkings never appear navel-gazing, obscure, or exclusionary – partly because they do not rely on insider knowledge to enable them to make meaning or feeling in the sympathetic viewer. For example, Cassils's reworking of Eleanor Antin's *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture* (1972) recasts Antin's formative feminist intervention through an embodied trans lens. Antin fasted for 45 days, and documented the diminishment of her body as a feminist overhaul of a traditional sculptural practice (dieting as carving). In *Cuts: A Traditional Sculpture* (2011), Cassils undertakes bodybuilding training, and consumes a high-calorie diet and injects anabolic steroids, in order to achieve a 'cut' body – to bulk muscle and strip away body fat – and, like Antin, documents their physical transformation in to a more profoundly transmasculine presentation across six gruelling months. The regime of physical training sculpts Cassils's body in a way that parallels Antin's process – to cut rather than to carve – with the added poignancy that Cassils uses endurance performance to supplant the surgical practices of bodily augmentation often associated with gender affirmation.

Cassils's homage does not require our prior knowledge of Antin's pioneering work for *Cuts* to do its own work, to make meaning, or simply to invite and sustain our interest. Cassils turns to historical works of art generally to *queer* history: that is, Cassils repurposes the old (perhaps the outmoded) for a new, queer, critical alternative; the queer update or critical revision exposes or undoes the way that historical models of political art perhaps fail to give thought to the particularities of queer ways of thinking, living, loving, socialising, or having sex. Not content simply to expose the normative limitations of mass culture, Cassils tends to seek out the tactical opportunities they find in experimental culture, too. When Cassils turns a critical eye to the past, they do so to investigate, frame, and complicate histories of violence, crisis in the pursuit of social justice, or formative lapses in aesthetic judgment. For example, in turning to Harun Farocki – a German-Indian pioneer of critical film in the 1960s and 1970s – Cassils does not critique his work (much less criticise him), but, rather, finds there an unresolved possibility that gives rise to a new, wildly ambitious series of works. Cassils takes their cue from Farocki's film *Inextinguishable Fire* (1969), a meditation on how trauma cannot be fully represented, specifically to show how the technologization of atrocity in the American War in Vietnam evades our full witness or understanding. Farocki demonstrates this in part by placing documentary images of war alongside footage of him stubbing out a lit cigarette on his bare arm. In Cassils' film of the same name, *Inextinguishable Fire* (2015), the artist undergoes a 'full body burn' – a stunt in which intricate precautions allow Cassils to literally be set on fire (safely, but only just) for 14 seconds. In the film, the image of Cassils on fire shuttles between reality (too much reality, and the very real threat of injury or death); and abstraction in the representation of flames, which have a kind of visual unreality or unworldliness to them, especially when pictured in slow motion, as in Cassils's film. The body on fire recalls to me specific instances of fire: Thích Qu ng Đ c's self-immolation in Vietnam in 1963, perhaps; or, closer to the moment of Cassils's action, Ferguson ablaze in anti-racist uprisings. In Cassils's hands, the image of the flame is also promiscuous: I see Joan of Arc transformed, Empedocles diving in the roiling hollow of Mount Etna, David Wojnarowicz's fire in the belly, Satan's breath, flaming lust, money to burn, firebirds, fireflies, firebrands, burning bridges, burning castles, the put-out eye and the fiery gaze, Vesuvius, Fuji, Krakatoa. *And who by fire? Who by water? Who by high ordeal? Who by common trial?*

In *Inextinguishable Fire*, and throughout Cassils's work, we see a ceaseless investigation of art's extremity – art's potential inflammation of the senses, of ontology, or of rational thought – an economy of sensory or intellectual *overkill*. One can identify Cassils's incorrigible attraction to the

limits of the body, of the human, or of sense, in their compulsion to represent (often in a nearly unmediated fashion) the body in situations of violence and aggression, including in their invocations of the rituals and performances of the gym, the boxing ring, the queer-bashing, or being set alight. In other signature works, Cassils endures hardships of many kinds. They suffer an ordeal by ice in *Tiresias* (2011), pushing their bare body up against an ice sculpture in the shape of an idealised male form, over the course of many hours. In *Becoming an Image* (2012), Cassils unleashes a sustained attack upon a gargantuan block of modellers' clay, with flying fists and feet, elbows and knees, and grunting expulsions of air – the assault pummels the mute object into new form over time, in pitch dark, lit only by the incidental flaring of a photographer's flash (the resulting sculpture from one such performance is the basis for *The Resilience of the 20%*, and, ultimately, *Monument Push*). We stand in hushed silence, and bold inaction, waiting for the violence to run its course. In *Powers That Be* (2016), they choreograph and perform a spectacle of violence, in which a body – Cassils's body – is set upon by unseen attackers, perhaps as if by a ghost, or by a trauma. To make the performance, Cassils worked with fight coordinator Mark Steger, and learned and reperformed the movements of queer young people in Russia whose assaults had been recorded by their assailants and posted online (generally as organised homophobic vigilante activity). Cassils presented the performance in a car park underneath the Broad Museum in Los Angeles, lit by the headlamps of vintage American cars parked in a circle. We, the audience, recorded Cassils on our phones, both to document the performance (the collected videos enable a six-channel video installation), as well as to make us complicit, really, in a history of brutality that we ought to abhor, but which we don't feel empowered (or, less generously, are not motivated) to prevent. Watching, we consent to Cassils's brutalisation, at least in an abstract way. Filming them on our phones, we reproduce the act of violence (perhaps not the beatings, but the concomitant humiliation) that enabled Cassils's response in the first place.

Cassils's attraction to extremity – to scenes in which the body loses control of itself, is injured, thrust into crisis, or dies – is all the more compelling for the way this tends, in Cassils's process or method, towards layered investigations that accumulate conceptual complexity, from work to work within a single series. For example, returning to *Inextinguishable Fire*, Cassils is not satisfied with performing (indeed, surviving) being set on fire: they repeat the action under different, more challenging circumstances, including in a live performance on the stage of the National Theatre, London in 2015; moreover, their attention is caught by the duration of the burn, and the fact that in order to avoid drawing the fire from the body into the airways (which would be catastrophic), Cassils is trained to exhale throughout the 14 seconds of their burning. So, Cassils's sculptural imagination draws them to create *Encapsulated Breaths* (2017), a series of 14 glass baubles created by the artist blowing molten glass for exactly 14 seconds. So doing, Cassils creates physical capsules for each equivalent volume of breath released in order to survive the conflagration, also metaphorically 'encapsulating' something of the fact that the border between life and death is a problem of breathing and its finitude: a figurative insight 'caught on the breath'. Coincidentally, or not, the right to breathe had become politically volatile during the making of *Inextinguishable Fire* – the phrase 'I can't breathe' became a *cri de coeur* of the Black Lives Matter movement after these words were spoken in desperation by Eric Garner in 2014 as he struggled (and failed) to survive a police officer's chokehold (they were the last words of George Floyd, too, as he lay dying under a police officer's knee in 2020). Moreover, the capsules resemble glass speech bubbles, perhaps suggesting small precarious monuments to conversation or dialogue; as fragile forms, they have been known to fall and shatter, suggesting the precarity of breath, and of language. The politics of breath, of who has the right to breathe, and of who is more likely to have

restricted access to air – whether of Black men who have the air squeezed out of them in scenes of unbridled police brutality, or of people disproportionately affected by polluted air as a result of the ever-worsening climate emergency – brings Cassils's film full circle to Harock's provocation, his visceral staging of the insufficiency and incomparability of suffering in art and in the world at large. Harock and Cassils know alike that while in art and performance, suffering is typically self-inflicted, manageable, and meagre in its political efficacy, unmediated suffering beyond the rarefied domain of art is generally non-consensual, mortifying or fatal, and can be politically explosive, at least when noticed by others.

Cassils's attraction to progressing ideas from one work to another in tightening circles of conceptual complexity is informed, no doubt, from their training at Cal Arts, where under the tutelage of the legendary conceptual artist Michael Asher, successive cohorts of students were required by Asher to think an idea, work, practice or medium to its logical conclusion. Asher's studio crits could last a full working day, and could focus exhaustively on seemingly irrelevant details, synchronicities, a throwaway comment, or an accident in a student's work, which might take eventual precedence over a work's intended effects or an artist's stated ambitions. So, Cassils rarely seems content with a finished piece, but, rather, finds a fault or flaw in the work or in its motivating idea, and transforming this into an unexploited possibility that ends in a new or complementary work. Moreover, this rigorous pursuit of formal complexity and political acuity leads Cassils into new tones or structures of feeling. If I've suggested, so far, the seriousness and gravitas of Cassils's endeavour, it's worth stressing also that Cassils's process also leads them, here and there, to humour or laughter. The bone-dry solemnity of *Monument Push*, *Inextinguishable Fire*, or *Becoming an Image* is offset, somewhat, by the levity of a lesser-known work like *Aline's Orchard (Between Scandal and Oblivion)* (2018), a recreation of a cruising ground, for which Cassils collaborated with a perfumier to create the unique scent of public sex, an aromatic blur of sweat, semen, leather, latex and poppers. Similarly, Cassils makes us laugh – however self-critically – at *Advertisement: Homage to Benglis* (2011), a photographic series made as the culmination of *Cuts: A Traditional Sculpture*. Posing for the photographer Robin Black, Cassils complements their appropriation of Antin's model of endurance performance with an homage to a legendary stunt by another pioneering feminist artist, Lynda Benglis. In 1974, Benglis purchased a page in *Artforum*, then the leading magazine for 'serious' art criticism: *Artforum* consented to print a full-page portrait of Benglis, tanned, oiled, and naked except for mirrored sunglasses, wielding a massive dildo that extended from her crotch. Intended as a satirical rejoinder to 'phallic' self-portraits by male artists (most directly, the Minimalist artist Robert Morris), its publication was a furor, and prompted the collapse of the magazine's editorial team. In Cassils's homage, the artist wears a stuffed jockstrap, and the surprise of the image is invited by the seemingly incongruous relation between their musclebound jock physique and their catwalk-ready face (in a wry zine produced to disseminate the work, Cassils summarises this visual clash as 'LadyFace/ManBody'). The punctum (the visual sign at which my perception of it stutters) is their luscious, overdrawn, scarlet lips, from which an imaginary red line can perhaps be drawn directly to Benglis's scandalous cock. Cassils's image caused its own scandal, too, going viral.

If the body has always been central to Cassils's work, especially in their live performances and photographic works, Cassils has also deliberately created situations in which the body is camouflaged, or removed from the field of vision. In *PISSED* (2017), one of their best-known works, Cassils collected their urine for 200 days, protesting the Trump Administration's legislative assault on transgender students who, after the rollback of an Obama-era Executive Order, were banned from using the

bathroom that matches their chosen gender. The collected urine is exhibited in an acrylic vitrine, resembling a Minimalist cube (another compulsive critique of art's histories – this time, poking fun at the 'specific objects' of Donald Judd or Robert Morris); it is shown alongside a wall of the 255 medical sample jars used to collect their urine throughout the 200 days of preparation. While the body remains active in the work – Cassils body produces the putative content of the sculpture – the image of the fleshy, live body is deleted or displaced. In its exhibited form, the body creeps back into the fray in various ways, including through the audio recording of a student activist's testimony, played as a sound installation. The camouflaging of the body is hardly coy, but, rather, shows a sensitivity on Cassils's part to muddling or removing the tendency for the bodies of transgender people – and especially transgender youths – to be spectacularised, forced into visibility in ways that, for many, are not reasonable, manageable, or survivable. This sensitivity to what can and cannot be seen of the trans body, or of trans lives, conditions their most recent work, *Human Measure* (2021). Bringing together trans, non-binary, and gender non-conforming people, Cassils works in low light to create (with choreographer Jasmine Albuquerque) a live performance that results in a photogram: a 'primitive' photographic technique through which a blast of light imprints – figuratively, perhaps, *burns* – the silhouette of the dancers on a canvas ground. Here, as elsewhere, Cassils stages their own incendiary imagination, performing ideas and images that set alight their surroundings, not to strip them bare in the brutal scrutiny of vision, but to do us justice, and perhaps to enable a wildfire in culture's near horizon.

Dominic Johnson is Professor of Performance and Visual Culture at Queen Mary University of London. He is the author of *Unlimited Action: The Performance of Extremity in the 1970s* and *The Art of Living: An Oral History of Performance Art*.

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