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Contest and Concordance: HEWILLNOTDIVIDE.US and Challenges to Resistant Discourses in Performance Art

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Cover Page Footnote

Alex Lockwood is a PhD student at Southern Illinois University. He would like to acknowledge Dr. Craig Gingrich-Philbrook for his excellent guidance in writing on performance pieces. Additionally, he would like to thank Shelley Rawlins, without whom this piece would not exist. My discussions with her regarding discourses and writing have been instrumental in shaping this piece.

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Alex Lockwood

In my response to this year's special call (of overcoming divisive discourses), I examine the case of LaBeouf, Rönkkö, and Turner's HEWILLNOTDIVIDE.US art installation, and the discourses that have emerged in response to this piece in the months since its opening. After identifying five discourses that seem to compete over the meanings and intent of the installation, I examine the ways in which these discourses might become more openly engaged in dialogic and transgressive encounters through an application of applied Bataillean abjection.

Keywords: installation art, resistant art, performance studies, dialogic performance, Bataille

At 9:00 a.m., on January 20, 2017, the Museum of the Moving Image in New York City began their livestream of *HEWILLNOTDIVIDE.US* – a public art installation conceived of by artists Shia LaBeouf, Nastja Säde Rönkkö, and Luke Turner (collectively referred to as LaBeouf, Rönkkö, and Turner). The installation consisted of a wall-mounted webcam with the words

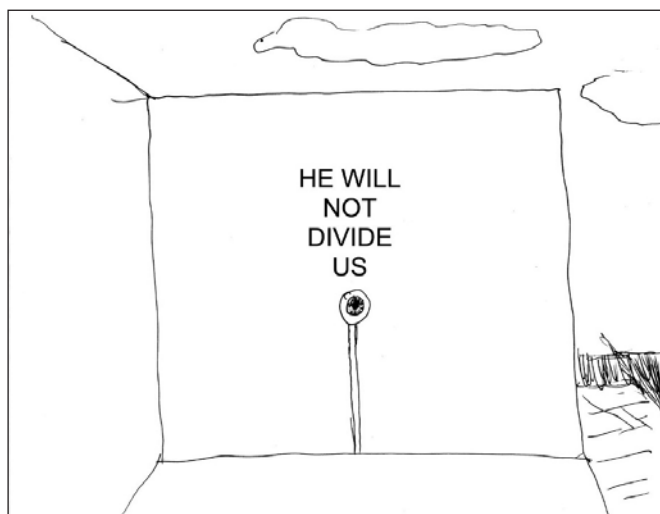


Figure 1. Author's sketch of *HEWILLNOTDIVIDE.US* installation

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“HE WILL NOT DIVIDE US” printed above. The artists’ declared purpose of the piece was to invite the public to engage in an inclusive expression by saying the phrase, “He will not divide us” into the camera, which would then have its feed livestreamed online. The piece was intended to remain on display until January 20, 2021, beginning and (presumably) ending with Donald Trump’s term as President of the United States. As of March 23, 2017, the piece has been discontinued following several relocations from New York City to Albuquerque, New Mexico, to Greenville, Tennessee, and finally, to the Foundation for Art and Creative Technology, in Liverpool, UK (“Artist’s Statement”).

In my response to this year’s special call concerning overcoming divisive discourses, I explicate the interplay of five discourses informing this art installation. I also explore strategies taken-up by this project, and other similar artistic projects aimed at “overcoming division.” In this consideration of public art space, I suggest that some approaches, such as the *HEWILLNOTDIVIDE.US* installation may be misguided in their conception of *division* as something to be *overcome*. Rather than understanding ideological or embodied contestation as being an unwanted affront to artistic projects, I advance a position of embracing this division as an emergent aspect of art pieces. Projects like *HEWILLNOTDIVIDE.US* evoke the spirit of Bataille’s abjection – that is, they promote conflict toward the point of rupturing existing hegemony (Bois and Krauss 47-50). This essay thus highlights how creations of performance art can suspend the performance act as transgressive and persistently dialogical – that is, as resistant to conclusions, open to interpretation, and committed to keeping the dialogue between performers, texts, and audiences open and ongoing (*a la* Conquergood 9).

Competing Discourses

From his declared intention of committing war crimes, to threats of imprisoning political rivals, Donald Trump has ushered in a volatile and divisive political discourse throughout the course of his presidential campaign, and well into his presidency. Trump’s branding of undocumented immigrants as “criminals, drug dealers, rapists, etc.” (qtd. in Ye He Lee), and the continuing vitriol he directs toward dissenting opinions, have created a prevalent discourse of divisiveness, scapegoating, and violence directed toward oppositional viewpoints. Additionally, in Trump’s assuming the office of the presidency, his discourse has come to represent (an increasingly bizarre) American political hegemony (as the world watches on...). Not unsurprisingly, this man’s threatening style of *hegemonic discourse* has increasingly been met with resistance.

LaBeouf, Rönkkö, and Turner’s *HEWILLNOTDIVIDE.US* participates in a tradition of activism-based, socially engaged *artistic discourse*. In addition to Trump’s hegemonic discourse, this second type of discourse and

participatory activity constitutes a social practice, a functional positioning of art, and an emphasis on the procedural rather than product-oriented aspects of a specific performances (Helguera 3). Such engagement also maintains that art is resolutely *social* in its impact (Helguera 3). *HEWILLNOTDIVIDE.US* calls upon social practice by tapping into a sense of collective agency. This simulcasting format asks both the onlookers on-site and mediated-viewers elsewhere to consider the people who step before the camera as perhaps being “guided by the spirit of each individual participant and the community” (“Artist’s Statement”). In this way, the participation of the public symbolizes what I term a discourse of *artistic-resistance*. By this I mean that it draws together the forces of artistic engagement, collapses a public/private distinction of “viewing” and/or “participating,” and provides a forum for disseminating contestation, *collectively*. All the while, this discourse rallies against the most powerful public official in the U.S., who seems, time and time again, to affront and threaten this freedom of expression.

In addition to Trump’s hegemonic discourse and the artistic-resistance discourses outlined above, yet a third discourse concerns the celebrity of one of the creators of *HEWILLNOTDIVIDE.US* – actor-artist Shia LaBeouf. This *media-celebrity discourse* interacts across both LaBeouf’s high-profile recognition, and the increasing amount of media coverage solely dedicated to the coverage of celebrity’s private lives (and public activities). While media is always present in artist exhibitions, the celebrity of LaBeouf has added a greater degree of media attention to the piece that performances and installation art pieces seldom enjoy.¹ The media’s increased focus, perhaps at times being more observant of LaBeouf’s celebrity than the greater artistic-resistant effort of the installation itself, potentially draws public participation away from the original intent of the piece, and instead frames the work as being centered around LaBeouf himself (“Statement”). This shifting of attention arguably paves the way for the emergence of *counter-resistant discourses* as they arrive at the site of the project (our next discourse for discussion).

Within a week of the opening of *HEWILLNOTDIVIDE.US*, protesters arrived at the installation site at the Museum of the Moving Image in New York City to launch counter-resistant discourses, seemingly directed against the unifying message of the piece.² The interventions of these counter-protesters, although technically acting within the loose parameters of the piece’s interactive protocol, served as tactics for inciting divisiveness through their disruptive resistance to the work, and the other people present.³ In addition to acting in support of multiple political figures and ideologies, the protesters’ activities were directed against the initial social engagement of the public artistic discourse. In doing so, these protesters created a new counter-resistant discourse, and acted in defense of the original hegemonic discourse that the work intended to challenge. This conflict between the counter-resistant and social-artistic discourses created a volatile and

potentially dangerous situation, which quickly moved the Museum of the Moving Image to intervene with their *institutional discourse*.

While the first four discourses (Trump's acerbic politically-hegemonic discourse; the social-artistic discourse of LaBeouf, Rönkkö, and Turner; the media-celebrity discourse surrounding the project; and the counter-resistant discourse of the protesters) highlight discussions that center around individual or collective formation/s – this final *institutional discourse* considers the Museum of the Moving Image's responsibility and/or relation to the work itself. The museum acts, in part, as a discursive configuration that constructs the rules by which the “public” artwork must abide. In their official statement concerning their closure of *HEWILLNOTDIVIDE.US*, the Museum of the Moving Image noted how the installation had become a “flashpoint for violence,” and that it “created a serious and ongoing public safety hazard for the museum, its visitors, staff, local residents, and businesses” (Museum). In contrast, LaBeouf, Rönkkö, and Turner maintain that the museum misrepresented their work as being politicized, and they fault the museum for failing to adequately moderate the installation (“Statement”). Amidst the complex confluence of these five associated discourses, the museum took action against the hopes of the public art piece.

On February 10, 2017, the Museum of the Moving Image ceased their role as host of the project, after the on-site protests and the continued belligerence of participants became too much for them to manage (Museum). The project was then moved to the El Rey Theater in Albuquerque, New Mexico on February 18, and was subsequently moved again on February 23, after gunshots were reported nearby. Ironically, a representative from the Albuquerque Police Department later stated that it was discovered and known that the gunshots were not fired in response to the installation (Reichbach). On March 22, 2017, *HEWILLNOTDIVIDE.US* was relocated to the Foundation for Artistic and Creative Technology in Liverpool, United Kingdom – reconceived as a flag with the words “HE WILL NOT DIVIDE US” emblazoned on it, settled upon a rooftop. However, within a day, the project was removed and is currently inactive, after protesters illegally accessed the roof (Reeve). As of this writing on August 30, 2017, the project has not been resumed since its removal from Liverpool.

Overcoming Division

The rapid reconfiguration of *HEWILLNOTDIVIDE.US* perhaps serves a greater heuristic social purpose in highlighting some of the simultaneous advantages and vulnerabilities of collectivized artistic-activist discourses. While LaBeouf, Rönkkö, and Turner's artist statement does not explicitly take any position regarding the politics of the installation, it is deeply embedded within and clearly co-constitutive of a political environment (that of Trump's election to president). Although LaBeouf, Rönkkö, and Turner may have preferred for the press coverage surrounding their installation to

have excluded explicit mention of the political implications of the work, the piece is nonetheless political at its foundation (“Statement”). Perhaps the artists were slightly naïve in taking such an overtly political stance, while still insisting that their work be viewed as not explicitly political. In addition to having the opening of the piece coincide with Donald Trump’s inauguration, the installation further participates in a politics of participatory art and its related attachments to an institutionalized art space. In choosing a public museum as its venue, the creators of *HEWILLNOTDIVIDE.US* engaged, in part, with an institutionally-bound framing of participatory performance art. Art historian Claire Bishop argues that this type of framing risks commodifying social participation, which further risks making such participation organized around a product, rather than appreciating its creation as an enlightening dialogical process (18). Further, artist David Levine has argued that durational strategies, such as those employed in the presentation of works like *HEWILLNOTDIVIDE.US*, disrupt the living experience of the performance event itself. In manipulating participatory performance spaces (e.g., with rules), and forcing them into a mold, they become more like a type of living sculpture to be viewed, than a collaborative piece “alive” with co-collaborative possibilities (227).

Bishop and Levine’s perspectives may well exemplify LaBeouf, Rönkkö, and Turner’s critique of the museum as being overly institutionalized and too concerned with public opinion. However, this perspective may also suggest that by embracing this exhibition as exemplifying the intersections of artistic and institutional discourses, the work was always-already actively co-constituting this seeming inefficacy. But perhaps it might be that all of these discourses suffer from their insulation from one another? Perhaps this failed installation was especially mitigated by each ongoing discourse considering the other/s, that are *always* present, as being incommensurate to their *own ends*? Following this consideration – what can artistic co-collaborative discourses show us about this conundrum?

Dis/entangling Discourses and Expanding Dialogic Art Spaces

While artistic discourses may be limited by their close relation to the institutional scope (conservatism) of museum spaces, the role of the artist-participant-spectator in the active construction of discourse provides even further complication in considering these kinds of art pieces. The participation of the artist-participant-spectator (a-p-s) is reflective of the strength of socially-engaged performance spaces, thus making explicit the dialogic flow between artist and audience. Simultaneously, the a-p-s may very well uncover the deep vulnerabilities within any such work – especially if these dialogic possibilities are stymied by institutional, hegemonic, counter-, or celebrity-related interventions and abstracted protocols. Unfortunately, Shia LaBeouf was arrested on January 26, 2017 at the site of *HEWILLNOTDIVIDE.US*, after engaging in a physical altercation with another (counter-)artist-participant-

spectator (Burnside). His arrest, coupled with the expansion of related protests at the installation sites, opened the door for an interpretation of performance space that potentially views the ever-present latent *possibility of conflict as a justification for its abandonment*. Here, indeterminacy comes to be more prominent than an engagement with difference or a movement towards clarity across these differences. While these counter-counter-protests may be participatory in their own right, the expression of such counter-resistance is often not performed in a manner whereby new discourses are constructed. Instead, the protest methods utilized by such resistance (often developed without a stance other than being oppositional) frequently serve to silence the original protest, and are thus, successful in their aims. In light of the continued thwarting of the artists' efforts (even after the project was made much more non-participatory when relocated to Greenville, Tennessee), one interpretation is that attempting to overcome divisive discourses through partnerships with institutions (always attached to hegemony at some level), may actually act to undercut the originally transgressive possibilities of performance.

While my assessment of *HEWILLNOTDIVIDE.US* largely reflects a characterization of the work as struggling to achieve its proposed purpose of overcoming division ("Statement"), I am not suggesting that the work would have been successful, but for the intervention of inflammatory protesters. Rather, as Mary Strine, Beverly Whitaker Long, and Mary Frances Hopkins contend, I claim that performance is an "essentially contested concept" (Strine et al. 181). Viewed as such, this idea suggests that performance must recognize that rival interpretations are "not only logically possible and humanly 'likely,' but [...] of permanent potential critical value to one's own use or interpretation of the concept in question" (Gailie 180-81). Given this interpretation that dissension is inevitable, I want to stress that my own propositions here are not intended to be prescriptive or call for performance art to take on a particular shape; nor do I intend to call on artists to adopt any particular interpretation. Rather, my view is that in tracing possibilities that we (performance scholars, artists, activists, etc.) might engage with, and in constructing our discursive and dialogic encounters with others, we should take care to resist prescribing definitive conclusions about the future of a work, or the unfolding dialogue among performers, texts, and audiences (Conquergood 9). I propose that in the construction of pieces that intend to engage in resistant discourses, performance artists/scholars might consider an openly *abject* view of artistic participation. By abject, I mean that participation in performance contemplates co-participation as a factor that may well disturb or disrupt hypothesized visions of creating unifying and/or normalizing actions. In advocating for an openness to this performative resistance, I am calling for a dialogic positioning of art pieces as never quite settled in their aims, and as always unfolding in their co-created meanings. Such interpretations of a work may be rendered as complexly emergent, as

not being under the control of any “one,” and even, as potentially disruptive to the ambitions of the artists themselves.

As an example of this sort of unfolding dialogue, I highlight artist Rosie Wheatland’s 2016 performance installation, *Bed*. In *Bed*, Wheatland engages in conversation with passersby for as long as the conversation lasts, while she rests in her outdoor bed (*Bed*). The execution of Wheatland’s protocol thus creates an environment in which artist-participant-spectators are freely engaged – and neither participant is limited in what they are asked to do, or encouraged to say. In this way, *Bed* approaches an artistic understanding of dialogical engagement as being abject. I employ the term abjection with an understanding of the term deriving from Georges Bataille’s essay, “Abjection and Miserable Forms.” In this essay, Bataille describes abjection as a process of disentangling totalizing conclusions and codification from socially dialogic processes through acts of performative transgression (10). In promoting the abject, I wish to challenge LaBeouf, Rönkkö, and Turner’s proposal that concordance is both a consequence and product to be arrived at through any *given* piece of art. However, I do not intend to diminish their efforts that went into creating and maintaining *HEWILLNOTDIVIDE.US*. Far from being only critical, I find value across many of LaBeouf’s interactions with other participants at the original site of the piece. In these interactions, he seemed to adopt an abject (here confrontational) viewpoint as a means of progressing the project forward, toward conflicted and unsettled conceptions of unification. It is this space for *living, dialogic, vulnerable engagements* that gives me hope for the transformative possibilities of such works, and for the generative unpredictability of the dialogic reception...

In my call for such open-ended participation surrounding art spaces to be considered abject, I am advocating for a type of radical participatory lens in performance art. One in which the ever-present constraints of institutional museum spaces do not (and will not) afford protections to *any group* of participants. Although this approach may sound “dangerous” in theory, this lens may call for a piece to be conducted away from museums, in open-access galleries, or under the supervision of more permissive institutions (with amended oversight, that may not even exist, yet). This abject lens highlights the possibility for conflict or concordance to be viewed as emergent and indeterminate aspects of a piece, and the pieces themselves and the artists who create them may well be committed to freely divide, or multiply, or perform any other sort of socially-arithmetical metaphors. This speaks to the value of welcoming and engaging multiple discourses, rather than abandoning divisive complexities. While this idea for transgressive, indeterminate art might be overwhelming in some respects (as it attempts to eschew institutional protections and anticipates emergent conflict as an immanent quality of participatory artwork), I feel that these complexities serve to make the implicit conflicts of a work more explicit. Abject participation, thus, casts a double-sided mirror onto the artists-participants-spectators, and emphasizes

that complacency, concordance and/or conflict within an artistic work is constantly affirmed and challenged, again and again – and this engagement is always welcomed.

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Endnotes

1 Popular coverage of performance art in the United States skirts an uneasy historical association with legislative action and a lack of interpretative analysis (Sigman 88-91). The disputes of the late 1980s and early 1990s between performance artists, the United States Congress, and the National Endowment for the Arts serve as an example of this (Kramer 230).

2 My information regarding the counter-resistant discourse is primarily taken from the *HWNDU Wiki*, a far-right website managed as a sort of affiliate of 4chan.org’s /pol/ (“politically incorrect”) image board (Hwndindu et al.). While I make use of this website in analyzing the videos and web-presence of various people at the *HEWILLNOTDIVIDE.US* installation, I do so only because, to my knowledge, this is the most comprehensive archive available on the subject. Although my current project only makes use of *HWNDU Wiki* as a database to chronicle the events at *HEWILLNOTDIVIDE.US*, I believe that it may serve as a useful resource for examining the alt-right, hate speech, and internet-based protest discourses in the future.

3 Examples of these silencing strategies can be found in the tactics utilized by certain protesters. Blocking the camera from others, reciting politically divisive, white nationalist, or alt-right slogans and catch phrases (e.g., “14,88,” “Obama bombs brown people!,” or referring to the project as “Cucks will not divide us”), and painting graffiti on the wall of the museum were all deployed by counter-protesters (Hwndindu et al.).

