Artforum
“Change Agent: Michael Ned Holte On the Art of Daniel Joseph Martinez”
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CHANGE AGENT

MICHAEL NED HOLTE ON THE ART OF DANIEL JOSEPH MARTINEZ

IN THE GOLDEN AGE OF HOLLYWOOD, the Million Dollar Theatre was the crown jewel among the grand movie palaces lining Broadway in downtown Los Angeles. Its ornate exterior, designed in the elaborate Spanish churrigueresque style, abounded with carved bison, steer heads, and allegorical figures playing stringed instruments, while the interior scheme was inspired by John Ruskin's 1841 fairy tale *King of the Golden River*. By the close of the 1980s, all the palaces on Broadway had fallen into disrepair, some converted into churches or budget theaters, others simply abandoned. Angelenos went to the Cineplex at the mall to see movies; "nobody" went downtown anymore unless they were already forsaken. At the center of this history-haunted no-man's-land, the Million Dollar Theatre provided an apt setting for Daniel Joseph Martinez's *Ignore the Dents: A Micro Urban Opera*, 1990. Commissioned by the extraordinarily ambitious Los Angeles Festival—which included performances and music by artists from twenty-two countries, with an emphasis on the Pacific Rim—the project offered Martinez an opportunity to work at an unprecedented scale and with a relatively big budget.

Left and right: **Daniel Joseph Martinez, *Ignore the Dents: A Micro Urban Opera*, 1990.** Performance views, Million Dollar Theatre, Los Angeles, September 1990. From the Los Angeles Festival, 1990.

Martinez believes that, more than a reflection of the world as it is, a work of art should propose how the world *could be*.

The novice director turned to collaborators including VinZula Kara, who composed the score, and Harry Gamboa Jr., whose texts served as a libretto of sorts. *Ignore the Dents* drew heavily on the history of the medium, with references to Monteverdi, Wagner, and Brecht, but this opera was decidedly intended for its present.

According to the artist, the work's title refers to the ability of people living in depressed urban areas to tolerate imperfections in the visual environment or even threats to their personal well-being. The opera unexpectedly began on the street, when ticketholders lined up outside the theater found themselves subjected to the inquisition of actors playing beggars. Inside, the performance remained confrontational. As audience members filed in, they could observe their own arrival on monitors onstage. Similar proscenium-breaking tactics were deployed throughout, with Martinez abruptly closing the show after arriving onstage from the back row and addressing the audience as the house lights turned on. Little documentation of the event exists. One of the few photos that have been preserved shows the seated orchestra wearing dunce caps, recalling Goya's powerful indictment of self-righteous sadism in his *Inquisition Scene*, ca. 1816.

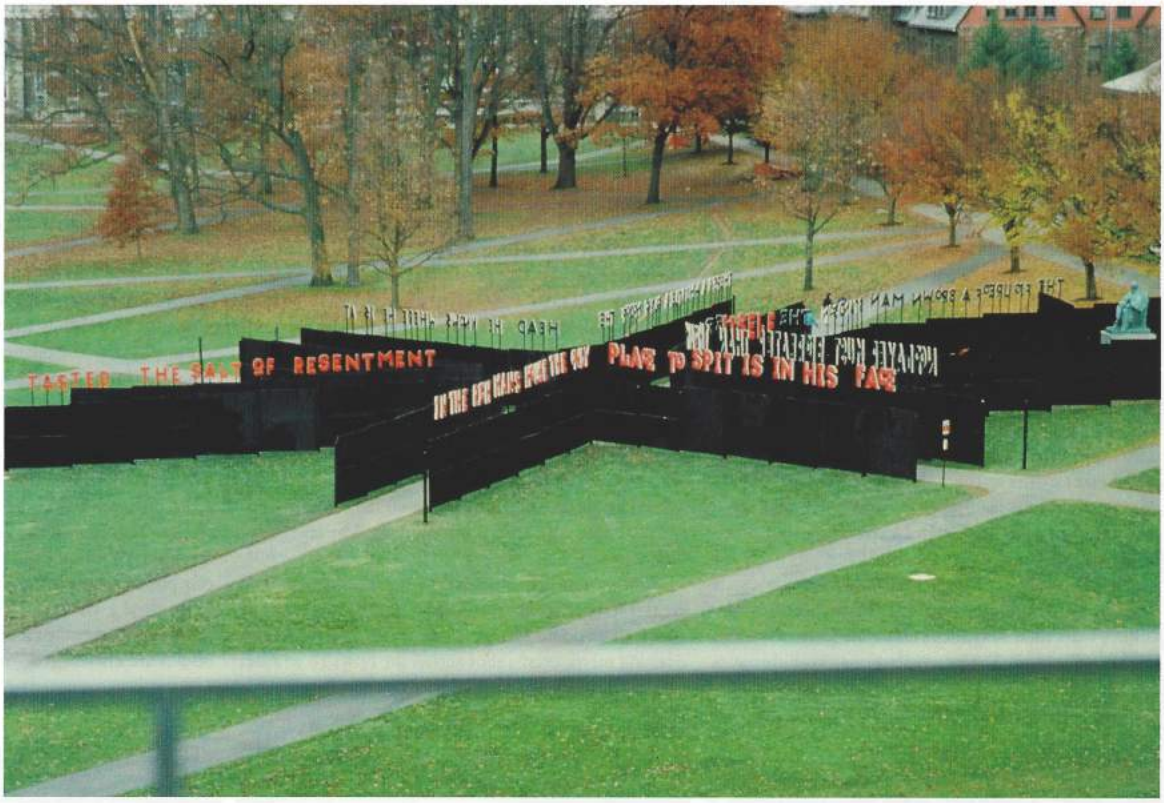
The opera was apparently as untidy as one might expect for a contemporary *Gesamtkunstwerk* directed by someone outside the usual boundaries of the field—and the response was typically hostile. *Los Angeles Times* music critic Martin Bernheimer was especially unsparing. "Martinez called his magnum opus 'an opera for people who hate opera.' It may be that," Bernheimer scoffed. "It certainly isn't an opera for people who like opera." This would not be the last time Martinez would be accused of giving the people what they *don't* want. From the vantage of the present, it might be easy to file away a mostly forgotten opera by Martinez as "ignorable" (per Bernheimer) if it hadn't set in motion, at a large scale, the artist's abiding interest in embodied language and in the movement of the body in space—space that, no matter how white or pristine, is never neutral.

These concerns can be traced through a diverse body of work that spans nearly four decades and includes photography, text paintings, animatronics, and large-scale outdoor sculpture. Three years after *Ignore the Dents*, Martinez realized a series of significant works that clearly extended his operatic impulse. For curator Mary Jane Jacobs's ambitious public art program "Culture in Action," which situated a variety of projects throughout Chicago in 1993, Martinez developed *Consequences of a Gesture (absurdist, carnival, hot parade)*, a work that commemorated several significant events in the city's history of immigrant labor, including the Haymarket Riot. The artist initially conceived of the piece as an "opera in four parts," but ultimately arrived at a more open-ended performance inspired by Mardi Gras parades and labor demonstrations, one owing more to the indeterminate *dérive* of Guy Debord than to Monteverdi. Working collaboratively with composer Kara and with community organizations in Chicago's working-class Mexican American and African American communities, Martinez planned an exuberant procession that took participants to historically loaded sites far from the city's usual parade routes. Accompanying that work was *100 Victories/10,000 Tears*—a monument for workers that was intended to complement the parade. Martinez obtained massive granite slabs that once served as an elevated sidewalk at the University of Illinois, Chicago, and resituated these as a low platform near the Maxwell Street Market—a site significant for its history of immigrant business, sometimes referred to as the "Ellis Island of the Midwest." The artist adorned a chain-link fence surrounding the site with signs bluntly informative (HAYMARKET SQUARE / DESPLAINES + RANDOLPH MAY 4, 1886 / 176 POLICEMEN ATTACK 200 WORKERS 4 DIE) or emphatically poetic (BENEATH THE PAVING STONES, THE BEACH—a favorite slogan of the *soixante-huitards*). Flat and expansive but encircled by language, the monument was in some sense an arena or stage for an unspecified action (or reaction), with the signs functioning as a libretto.

Later that year, for the exhibition "*Revelaciones*/Revelations: Hispanic Art of Evanescence," at Cornell University, Martinez presented another work that,

Right: **Daniel Joseph Martinez, *The Castle is Burning*, 1993,** tar on plywood, Styrofoam letters. Installation view, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY, 1993–94.

Below: **Daniel Joseph Martinez, *100 Victories/10,000 Tears*, 1993,** forty granite slabs, twenty-four signs. Installation views, Maxwell Street Market, Chicago. From "Culture in Action," 1993.



like *Consequences of a Gesture*, intended to disrupt the prescribed pathways of everyday life: *The Castle Is Burning*, a monumental construction of eight-foot-high black-painted walls sprawling in starburst formation across the campus's quad. Thin horizontal slits offered restricted views of the surrounding campus if viewers were willing to crouch. The high walls were crowned by language—phrases written and found, inflammatory and oblique. One, by Diogenes, the original cynic, read IN THE RICH MAN'S HOUSE THE ONLY PLACE TO SPIT IS IN HIS FACE. The sculpture quickly became a blackboard for the collective id, its aphorisms annotated by graffiti condemning Latinos, immigrants, and the artist. Galvanized by this defacement, a group of Latino students (including future novelist Junot Díaz) occupied the administrative offices, effectively shutting down the university while demanding that school officials protect the artwork and better address the concerns of minority students—eventually leading to the university instituting its Latino Living Center and expanding its Latino Studies Program.

But clearly, the castle *was* burning, and not just at Cornell. And no work was closer to the flames of the culture wars than Martinez's contribution to the 1993 Whitney Biennial. The now-infamous exhibition was a watershed in contemporary art's engagement with identity politics, and it was largely eviscerated by critics, who perceived it as stridently polemical. The furor that arose around Martinez's *Museum Tags: Second Movement (Overture); or, Overture con claque (Overture with Hired Audience Members)*, 1993, was especially intense. Easily his best-known work (it was featured on *Artforum*'s cover in May 1993), the project was an elegant provocation: Martinez simply redesigned the Whitney Museum of American Art's tiny metal admission tags, replacing the existing text, WMAA, with I CAN'T IMAGINE EVER WANTING TO BE WHITE. This declaration was broken into five constituent parts; visitors received a tag bearing one of these snippets, or the whole sentence. Given the function of the tags, it was a work that could not be ignored by its audience—its presence was compulsory, marking everyone who entered the gates of the castle with a literal emblem of a culture in political turmoil. What does it mean to embody such language in context—to not only read it but be tagged by it? (As in: *Tag, you're it.*)

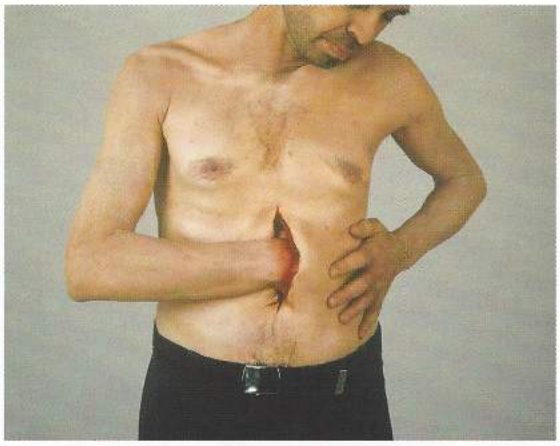
What most critics failed to notice was that the work's lengthy subtitle offered a significant point of access to its operation. As an overture, it served as an opening salvo, even a shot across the bow: To be sure, the work challenged any familiar notion of ingratiation as one entered the museum. The reference to "hired" audience members, who in fact had no choice but to undertake the "work" of performance if they wanted to see the show, may allude to institutional missions aimed at increasing audience diversity—or possibly even to the hired museum guards, who were given individual agency (according to the dictates of the piece) to wear as many of the tags as desired. But an overture is also an invitation, an attempt to forge connections and begin conversations. The hostile reaction to *Museum Tags* suggests that its claim was willfully misread as I HATE WHITE PEOPLE, in the same way that the hashtag #AllLivesMatter presupposes that the phrase "Black Lives Matter" is somehow suggesting other lives don't. Caricatured as unambiguous to the point of reductiveness, the work was in fact anything but stable.

Circa 2016, the tags' eight-word sentence seems more resonant than ever, its complexities and ambivalences reflected in the vexed ferment of contemporary racial politics. Even though *Museum Tags* is fully of a piece with its own historical moment, it's difficult to think of a work (or its attendant uproar) that feels more eerily ahead of its time. Right now, individual bodies are also tagged—often against their will—by a

social body, commented on, policed, trolled. The fragmentary tag I CAN'T anticipates the clipped meme that Urban Dictionary dates to 2005 and defines as meaning, "When enough is enough. The limit or breaking point in a situation." Another tag reads, EVER WANTING, a phrase that holds desire in suspension. Divorced from the full sentence, from the negation of I CAN'T and from the semiological implications of WHITE, it suggests an impossible, ungrounded urgency. IMAGINE, however, might be the most radical of the *Museum Tag* fragments. Isolated, the word reads as an encouragement or dare. The conditioned spaces of the gallery or museum provide useful frames—and crucial physical and historical traction—for these speculative operations, a lesson inherited most directly from Martinez's CalArts instructor and role model Michael Asher, who similarly probed the castle's whole apparatus, from gate to throne.

Like Asher's interventions, *Museum Tags* rejects didacticism. It is startlingly open, like a sphinx's riddle fractured and mobilized in space. What seems clear enough, considering his larger body of work in a wide array of media, is that Martinez has a particular understanding, a belief, about what a work of art is or should be: More than a reflection of the world as it is, a work of art—any work of art, but most specifically

Language becomes a detonating device, one meant to be tripped over by the unsuspecting viewer.



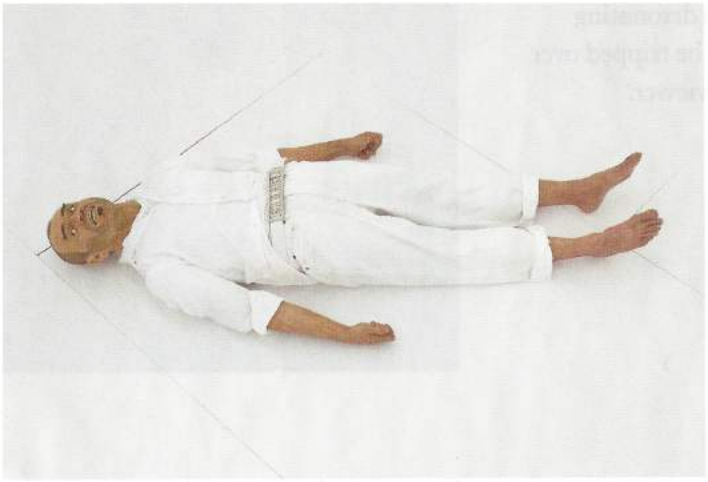
his own—should propose how the world *could be*. In short, it's propositional, a starting point for thought experiments in which a variable (the "what if") is brought to bear on a control (the world—or its castle—as it is). The point is not necessarily to reach a firm conclusion, much less a happy ending.

Words are most often not our own, and Martinez freely borrows his from available sources, deploying them in unanticipated contexts (and usually without attribution) as a means of unleashing their urgent potency. In this sense, there is an unquestionable violence in the way language becomes a detonating device, one meant to be tripped over by the unsuspecting viewer. These are metaphors, of course, but Martinez wants to remind us that language has real consequences, because the usual paths of rational thought and syntax will not necessarily get us to a place where we can productively imagine how our own imperfect world *could be*—which is what all of his works ultimately provoke us to do. But this is by no means an entirely cognitive operation: Verbal propositions are capable of inciting violence and inflicting bodily harm, and there is a whole history of carnage to prove it.

Much of Martinez's work has, in fact, tended toward the visceral, rendering even more explicit the bodily charge of the museum tags or the eight-foot-high black fence dividing a college campus. Alongside his operatic gestures activated by language, he has produced a number of intensely carnal works, poised at the furthest limits of language's signifying capacities, such as a 2006 installation at LAXART, where he coated the gallery floor with a heavy cover of asphalt and ringed it with a thick icing of Beuysian lard, invoking corporeality at its most abject if sublimated. He has also repeatedly imaged his own body subjected to extraordinary violence. A series of photographs from 1999 to 2002, collectively titled "Coyote: I Like

Above: **Daniel Joseph Martinez, *Self Portrait #9b: Fifth attempt to clone mental disorder; or, How one philosophizes with a hammer, after Gustave Moreau, "Prometheus," 1868, and David Cronenberg, "Videodrome," 1981*, 2004**, digital C-print, 48 × 60". From the series "Coyote: I Like Mexico and Mexico Likes Me (More Human Than Human)," 1999–2002.

Left: **Daniel Joseph Martinez, *Museum Tags: Second Movement (overture); or, Overture con claque (Overture with Hired Audience Members)*, 1993**, paint and enamel on metal. Five views, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. From the 1993 Whitney Biennial.



Martinez's prosthetics take us as close as possible to the horror they depict.

Mexico and Mexico Likes Me (More Human Than Human)," includes images of the artist with his throat slit open, holding his own severed head on a platter, and extracting his own intestines. These otherwise elegant images—drawing on the gory precedents of Caravaggio, Gustave Moreau, and David Cronenberg, among others—are produced with the use of elaborate makeup and prosthetics, but as thought experiments, they take us as close as possible to the horror depicted.

In 2002, Martinez presented *To Make a Blind Man Murder for the Things He's Seen (or Happiness Is Over-rated)* at the Project in Los Angeles. In a blindingly white, otherwise empty space, his animatronic double knelt on the ground. Dressed in blue coveralls with untied sneakers, dark hair slicked back, the figure holds razors in each hand, slashing one wrist, then the other, before erupting in laughter. The ritual suicide is repeated over and over, like clockwork. The title is a paradox that nonetheless calls attention to the position of the viewer, who is perhaps not merely a voyeur but an actor, "making" this blind man murder himself. Like *Museum Tags*, the sculpture acknowledges—and hyperbolizes—the codependent relationship between artist and audience, a contract that legislates the distribution of power and usually remains unspoken.

Four years later, another self-image—*Call Me Ishmael: The Fully Enlightened Earth Radiates Disaster Triumphant*—appeared in the United States pavilion at the Tenth International Biennale of Cairo, in a similarly empty white cube. Lying prone on the floor, this doppelgänger was dressed in white shirt and pants adorned with a belt buckle reading ISHMAEL—perhaps referring to the exiled son of Abraham, as well as later literary incarnations. Without warning, the mute body begins flailing, as if in epileptic seizure, its bare hands and feet banging violently against the ground. Martinez has cited the thrashing body of the exterminated replicant Pris, played by Daryl Hannah in Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982), as an inspiration for the work. In Scott's film, the replicants—"skin jobs," as one character derisively refers to them—are designed for timed obsolescence and provide constant reminders of the fraught boundaries that divide humanity from its others. The programmed seizure of "Martinez" (I experienced the work in its second incarnation, at the Orange County Museum of Art

Opposite page, top: **Daniel Joseph Martinez, *Call Me Ishmael: The Fully Enlightened Earth Radiates Disaster Triumphant*, 2006,** silicone, fiberglass, computer-controlled pneumatics, animatronic sculpture. Installation views, Museum of Modern Art, Cairo, 2006. From the 10th International Cairo Biennale.

Opposite page, bottom: **Daniel Joseph Martinez, *To Make a Blind Man Murder for the Things He's Seen (or Happiness Is Over-rated)*, 2002,** silicone, fiberglass, computer-controlled pneumatics, animatronic sculpture, digital audio, sound system, 39 × 21 × 24".

Right: **Daniel Joseph Martinez, *IF YOU DRINK HEMLOCK, I SHALL DRINK IT WITH YOU or A BEAUTIFUL DEATH; player to player, pimp to pimp. (As performed by the inmates of the Asylum of Charenton under the direction of the Marquis de Sade)*, 2016,** silicone, fiberglass, cloth, artificial blood, hair, paper, quill, ink, wood, steel, paint, audio, video, bleachers, sound, video. Installation view, Roberts & Tilton, Los Angeles, CA, 2016. Photo: Robert Wedemeyer.

in 2008) is unbearable in its violence—and as a reminder of the body's involuntary movements and its inevitable death.

Earlier this year, Martinez staged a tableau starring three versions of himself at Roberts & Tilton gallery in Los Angeles. Titled *IF YOU DRINK HEMLOCK, I SHALL DRINK IT WITH YOU or A BEAUTIFUL DEATH; player to player, pimp to pimp. (As performed by the inmates of the Asylum of Charenton under the direction of the Marquis de Sade)*, 2016, the work is an adaptation of Jacques-Louis David's painting *Death of Marat* (1793) and Peter Weiss's play *Marat/Sade* (1963). A trio of hyperrealistic sculptural representations of the artist appear in the roles of revolutionary Jean-Paul Marat; his killer, Charlotte Corday; and Martinez, playing himself, as it were, transported into the historic scene. Marat droops in his famous bathtub. The Corday figure, shirtless and infested with raw pink lesions—presumably a displaced reference to Marat's severe skin disease, the reason for his long sessions in the tub—holds the bloodied knife as if ready to stab again. The third Martinez figure, in jeans and a T-shirt, stands behind Corday, one hand gently touching the murderer's shoulder.

The gruesome display is compelling and repulsive in nearly equal measure, not unlike the proverbial car wreck one can't look away from. If *Ishmael* was horrifying in its flailing, this work is unsettling in its utter stillness: While these figures are not animatronic (as a follower of Martinez might by now expect), they are lifelike enough to anticipate or perhaps hallucinate their sudden movement. Viewers are encouraged to get close, to observe from all angles, though aluminum stadium seating is provided on either side of the gallery, as if to situate the audience as witnesses to a distant spectacle—a sporting event, or perhaps a beheading. Bullhorns attached to the scaffolding broadcast the artist reading Corday's monologues from Weiss's play. There is a sense of confusion as this self—meaning Martinez's—proliferates into three bodies, a trio of replicants, with another suggested by the disembodied voice. It is impossible not to fixate on the pink wounds of "Corday," and in their displacement from one (historic) figure to the next, they mark an uncontrollable transference, a contagion. Here, as elsewhere, Martinez establishes the proscenium only to violate it, contaminating the line between subject and object, artist and viewer: The three figures appear as actors but it is—as always—the audience being asked to perform.

If Marat's death marks the apparent stifling of a revolutionary leader, then David's painting of the martyr—urgently produced and paraded through the streets before eventually being exiled to the castle wall, and to History—held open the promise that a work of art might, even in the darkest of times, move an otherwise immobilized polity. Perhaps that is an unreasonable expectation for a work of art now, but reasonableness has a politics of its own, of course—one that discredits the "unreasonable" demands of the unjustly disempowered, using reason as a silencer, while assiduously denying the horrific and wholly unreasonable violence that power visits on bodies and subjects. Why Corday and Marat now? Because revolution is an ideological breaking point—one triggered by an I CAN'T that is also a WHAT IF? □

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