



Aline's Orchard (Between Scandal and Oblivion)

Julia Steinmetz

Inextinguishable Fire: Burn for Portrait, 2015
Photo: Cassils and Robin Black



Queerness is not yet here.
—José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*

In a progression of major works developed, performed, and exhibited over the course of the past decade, Cassils has used a mastery of techniques of the body in order to achieve desired performative and sculptural effects. In processes laden with exhaustion, pain, nausea, jouissance, and trembling, Cassils draws us into the intense emotional valence of enacting the desires and fantasies of the psyche on, in, and through the materiality of the flesh. These intensive enactments begin with the body, interrogating the fissures and points of contact between queer and trans embodiment and representational practices. The artist's body, however, does not exist in isolation: it shapes and is shaped by context and environment, sending and receiving sonic, tactile, and affective communications, leaving indexical traces of encounters and actions.

The capacity for sound to imply both a space and a set of relations is a thread that runs through Cassils's performance-based works, ranging from *Inextinguishable Fire* (2014), in which sound design by longtime collaborator Kadet Kuhne serves to enhance the viewer's identification with Cassils as the artist undergoes a full-body burn, to the four-channel audio installation *Ghost* (2013), which redeploys sound recordings from the performance *Becoming an Image* (2012) to produce a ghostly sonic apparition of the artist bashing a two-thousand-pound block of modeling clay. We depend on our brains to make sense of sound, to interpret it instantaneously. In *103 Shots* (2016), Cassils uses the affective force of sound to create a powerful memorial to the mass shooting at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida. This short film exposes the ways in which listening is susceptible to the vagaries of expectation: survivors of the shooting heartbreakingly recount their initial assumption that the sounds they heard were balloons popping, fireworks bursting, or champagne bottles opening—anything but gunfire. The footage presents stark black-and-white imagery of a series of pairs of couples and friends bursting a balloon between their bodies with the pressure of an embrace accompanied by a sound track of Foley recordings of balloons popping in a

cement room, which in turn sound like gunshots. The faces of the film's participants register affection, surprise, pain, discomfort, and laughter; each embrace is a minor enactment of the disorienting effect of violence in the space of intimacy.

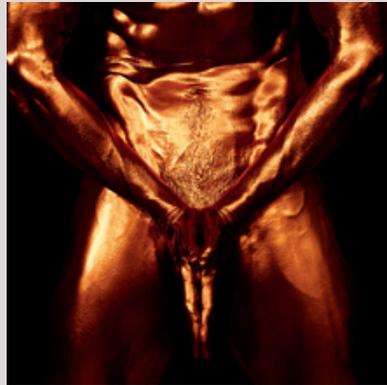
Sound speaks the language of the body: it moves us. In *Aline's Orchard* (2018), on view in the COLA exhibition, Cassils calls on a repertoire of sonic aesthetic strategies and sensory techniques to mine a social and erotic space from the past and superimpose it on the present, interpellating bodies in the here and now into the glimmer of a potential queer future. This work references the specific history of Barnsdall Park, which was created and donated to the city by the oil heiress, experimental theater director, notable eccentric, and single mother by choice Aline Barnsdall, who purchased Olive Hill in 1919 and turned it into a radical artistic enclave. Drawing on archival research, oral history, and active imagination, Cassils uses sound and sensory suggestion to re-create the Barnsdall olive groves in total darkness as a once and future site of political radicalism and queer cruising. Live grasses and dried leaves contribute to this immersive environment, which is also permeated with a custom scent composed by a perfumer in collaboration with the artist. The space is filled with the suggestive scents of aroused bodies, raw earth, and pheromones designed to activate a combined sense of fear and pleasure.

We are transported to a moment in which Silver Lake is a bastion of communism commonly referred to as "red hill," the Mattachine Society is being formed on the stone steps leading up an epic local hill, and sexual and artistic unions crossing lines of race and class are staged amid the olive trees. *Aline's Orchard* conjures up the city's erstwhile queer haunts and, in doing so, enacts a kind of anticipatory illumination, a queer utopian moment. As José Esteban Muñoz writes in the opening pages of *Cruising Utopia* (2009), "We have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine the future." Amid the rustling leaves of the olive trees and the quickened breathing of erotic anticipation, we might just brush up against queerness and feel the breath of futurity on our cheeks, an invitation to another world. ●

Left: *Becoming an Image Performance Still No. 3*, 2013
Edgy Women Festival, Montreal
Photo: Cassils with Alejandro Santiago



200 days, 200 gallons. 2017
Photo: Cassils and Robyn Beck



Alchemic no. 3. 2017
Photo: Cassils and Robin Black

Advertisement: Homage to Benglis. 2011
Photo: Cassils and Robin Black

