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Pugilistic queer performance: working through and working out

In Franko B's *Milk & Blood* (2015) and Cassils's *Becoming an Image* (2012), the artists fight their way through the performance event.¹ They hurl their bodies into action, respectively against a boxing bag and a mound of clay, under the glare of lights, cameras and spectators, and the mounting pressures of time. Pugilism is both the object and means of artistic production, which physically and figuratively takes to task unresolved queer battles - personal and cultural. Understood in light of the artists' wider bodies of work, and the subtler details of production context - both were originally created as site-responsive works - this fighting additionally lands with the explosive force of a punch through time, unleashing the pent-up strains of violence and survival throughout history. By the end of each vigorous performance, the artists are visibly exhausted, their bodies and the surrounding materials streaming and glimmering with sweat. The borders between flesh and matter, present and past, art and life are exposed as always already porous, and we are left with a landscape of shimmering surfaces and material remnants that will, in time, mattify and disappear.

Franko and Cassils are best known as queer performance artists, whose work navigates the leaky intersections of desire, sexuality and embodiment, often by exploring their bodies' capacity for material resistance and transformation. For Franko this has predominantly included bloodletting practices and visual artwork throughout the course of his career, which began in the 1990s, and for Cassils, whose career began in the 2000s, this has involved bodybuilding and feats of physical strength and endurance. But in *Milk & Blood* and *Becoming an Image*, the thrust of each performance is less to invasively rupture bodily parameters, than to show what bodies already hold, can release, and do. Each performance

stimulates and forensically tracks the progressive effects of fighting over time, for the solo performers themselves and for those whose struggle they strive to bear witness to.

This article situates these examples of queer pugilistic performance within a history of performative combat, examining how it functions as a mode for 'working out' residual queer battles – residual in the sense of being historically sidelined as well as permeating the present. In doing so, I develop an argument around 'working out' as an embodied and physically oriented performance mode, which engages with personal, cultural and historical circumstances via training and combat. Working out offers us a performative complement or even reverse-orientation to Sigmund Freud's psychologically-centered idea of 'working-through' (Freud 1914), a term he used to describe the psychoanalytic process, and one which has prevailed in understandings of the processing of pain and trauma. Reading these pugilistic performances in the context of the slide between working through and working out allows us to perceive the material body as both the object of loss and trauma, and in practised form, the key instrument of change. It compels us to keep the body at the center of debates of traumatic intervention and negotiation in queer studies and beyond, as the fighting bodies themselves appear to insist.

I begin by situating pugilistic performance within a longer tradition of theatre and performance that utilizes fighting imagery and tactics, including queer practices. Turning to Freud's model of working through, I consider how it might be challenged or energized by a more performance-centered conception of working out, as represented in examples by Franko B and Cassils. In their performances of training and combat, I suggest, absented people, places, passions and practices are forced into presence. Pugilistic performance labor functions as a vehicle for channeling frustrated desire and struggle - individual and cultural, contemporary and historical - as well as an engine that produces it in the present.

Ultimately the article argues that these examples of queer pugilism draw our attention to unresolved queer battles, and the centrality of embodied action to their negotiation.

Performing combat

Franko and Cassils belong to a broader tradition of theatrical performance and performance art which has harnessed fighting imagery and tactics within its practices, drawing on boxing's inherently performative behavioral codes and visual shocks. Since the early 20th century in particular, theatre has demonstrated interest in mining disciplinary parallels, whether by explicitly staging boxing, drawing upon its aesthetics, or aligning the practices conceptually. Initially, this was consistent with an expanded interest in boxing in the late 19th century among writers and artists. In 1878 Eadweard Muybridge produced the first sequential photographs featuring moving horses, though his groundbreaking experiments with Thomas Eakins in the 1880s generated over 100,000 images of humans and animals in motion, including men boxing and shadowboxing. The public interest in boxing's presentation of the body in motion was also seized upon by the emerging film industry, becoming a staple of nickelodeons. Early filmmakers, including the Latham brothers and Enoch Rector, were also interested in boxing because it appealed to working class male audiences, with the potential to be commercially profitable. But boxing also held technical and practical appeal: cinema was initially fascinated with tracking movement above all else, and given that large cameras were difficult to move around, placing them by a boxing ring permitted the capturing of intricate action, without much physical exertion on the crew's part (Broddy 2008: 154).

Bertolt Brecht admired the physicality and aggression of boxing, and believed that its fans represented ideal theatre spectators.² *In the Jungle of Cities* (1923) is composed of a drawn-out, semi-pugilistic encounter between George Garga, a poor immigrant from the prairies and Shlink, a prosperous Malay lumber dealer. In the 1927 prologue, Brecht describes the play as “an inexplicable wrestling match,” while the programme note for the 1928 Heidelberg production frames the fight more specifically as a microcosm for “class struggle” (Brecht 1994: 436). Brecht’s interest in boxing partly emerged from his interest in America, as he perceived the practice as a quintessential form of national mass culture, intimately connected to urban life and modernity.³ In a distilled, more verbal form, the sort of aggressions found in Brecht’s drama pattern David Mamet’s plays, in which characters are always on the brink of fighting, such as in *Speed-the-Plow* (1988). Mamet, like Brecht, admired boxing as a particularly national sport, but also for its capacity to simplify more complex and entrenched social, cultural and economic power games (Nadel 2011). As he puts it: “Boxing, a reduction of capitalism, is about whacking the other guy in the head until he passes out, or whacking him sufficiently in the body to cause him to lower his arms so that one may whack him in the head” (Mamet 2007).

While Brecht and Mamet represent important instances in boxing’s permeation of theatre performance in the 20th century, more recently still, a number of productions have explicitly put the practice on stage as a tool to negotiate experiences of marginal identity and sexuality. For instance, Mojisola Adebayo’s 2016 revival of *Muhammad Ali and Me* (2008) explored the influence of Ali on a young black girl growing up in foster care in the UK in the 1970s, eventually grappling with her gender, sexual and racial identity, while Roy Williams’s *Sucker Punch* (2010), set in a London boxing club in the 1980s, illuminated racial tensions in the context of laboring black masculinity. Marco Ramirez’s *The Royale* (2015)

focuses on the life of the famous black boxer Jack Johnson, as does Howard Sackler's earlier *The Great White Hope* (1967). In Peggy Shaw's *You're Just Like My Father* (1993), the performer reflects on her butch lesbian identity and her relationship with her working class Irish father, who was a boxer, by shadowboxing on stage. This work is clearly influenced by the artfulness of boxing, informed by its deft but brutal choreography; a continuum occasionally glimpsed in Ali's own self-aware dance interludes. But it is also inspired by boxing's capacity to work out aggression by formally and aesthetically containing it, rerouting it towards social or professional mobility, not least among the queer, working class and communities of color that dominate those represented in this list. ⁴

Performance that portrays fighting, even with stage training, differs somewhat to that which enacts it in real time, making alternative physical demands on bodies and possibly soliciting different reactions from audiences. Suffice to say, alongside this tradition of staged fighting, there is an equally rich history of performance artists incorporating boxing practices and aesthetics within their work. Johnson, the subject of Ramirez's *The Royale*, is widely known as a famous champion boxer, though he is less remembered for fighting the nephew of Oscar Wilde, poet-pugilist and early Dadaist innovator Arthur Craven, aka Fabian Lloyd. In an attempt to avoid WWI, Craven travelled from Paris to New York in 1916, stopping off in the Canary Islands, with the hope of raising some money to support his travels, by agreeing to fight Johnson. There was no hope of Craven winning, but he acted in the experimental spirit of Dadaists of the time, who saw themselves as men of action and art. In this, Craven's boxing can be seen to prefigure aspects of conceptual and performance art.

These early stirrings of pugilistic performance art find fuller expression in the work of Joseph Beuys, who remains an important touchstone for queer performance art. Beuys

founded the Organization for Direct Democracy through Referendum in 1971, and staged actions, gave talks and created exhibitions to communicate the radical ideas emerging from the group. During the first year, he handed out bags featuring diagrams of the organization in Cologne, swept streets in West Berlin and put the rubbish in an art gallery, while chairing debate with spectators. Beuys also established an Information Office in the *documenta 5* exhibition, as part of which he debated with gallery visitors for 100 days. On the final day, he competed in and won a real fight - the *Boxing Match for Direct Democracy* (1972). The pugilistic aesthetic has since appeared in various iterations, in performance by The Kipper Kids (*Boxing Ceremony*, 1972), to more recent work by EJ Hill (*O Captor, My Captor*, 2014) and Li Liao (*Attacking the Boxer from Behind is Forbidden*, 2015).

While the relationship between performance and pugilism in this range of examples shifts between being subtle and direct, represented and enacted, the collective practices are united in the sense that the fight takes place in relationship to an obvious opponent against whom an individual ostensibly fights. Franko's and Cassils's fighting more obviously belongs to a tradition of solo queer performance, where the object is not only some sort of personal expression and transformation – a reckoning with an internalized opponent or an urge to testify - but a confrontation with the violent or violated ghosts of the past suggested by the materials and circumstances of the present. The work out of the present, we might say, strives to work through the aggressions of the past.

Puncturing the past

Franko B is an Italian-born, UK-based performance and visual artist whose work has long mined the relationship between trauma, sexuality, vulnerability and endurance. In *Milk &*

Blood the performer confronts personal and cultural history through the medium of a solo boxing session. In this approximately 40-minute performance, the artist engages in 10-13 rounds of boxing (roughly 2 minutes each) with a bag filled with milk. Over the course of the performance, Franko spurs words that echo previous preoccupations: “tortured, betrayals;” “destabilised, fired up, abandoned, mental;” “overdose, wars, pain;” “rejected, naked.” This vocabulary is drawn from his staccato text “Insignificant” (2015), in which the titular term appears 127 times out of 843 words. In the text, the repetition of “insignificant” appears to undermine every intermittent grave concern, while spoken in performance it threatens to undercut Franko’s physical achievement.

Originally set inside Toynbee Hall, which was established in 1884 to bridge the gap between Londoners of different economic and cultural backgrounds, via hosting a Citizens Advice Bureau, classes and clubs, Franko’s performance summons the histories of marginality and violence, power and privilege with which the building has been concerned.⁵ Some of Franko’s earlier explorations of childhood abandonment and institutionalization - the performer grew up in a Catholic orphanage in Italy - can be seen to persist in the original production context of this work, with the Hall being once home to the East London Juvenile Court, where trials took place between 1929 and 1953. In this ghosting of historical function and cultural context, Franko’s performance also invokes histories of child welfare and justice, especially with regard to disciplining poor and socially disadvantaged young men.

The efforts of Franko’s strenuous live action become apparent as he starts to breathe heavily, while sweat flows from his body. There is no live human opponent in this performance, even if there is antagonism and resistance: the boxing bag opposes and mirrors Franko, as we will see the clay opposes and mirrors Cassils. In enduring these rounds

of boxing, it is clear that Franko has trained for the occasion - and in many ways this is also a scene of training - but his is not the kind of hard, domineering normative male physique we might expect from a boxer. Franko's body looks both forceful and soft, resilient and vulnerable, as it has been throughout his performance career.

Now in his late 50s, Franko's ageing body bears the scars of previous bloodletting performances and the marks of faded tattoos, and it invites us to reflect upon his long performance art career and what battles he may still be fighting. Franko is perhaps best known as a performer who has used his own blood in performance, often letting it against his typically whitened naked body in works such as *Mama I Can't Sing* (1995-2000), *I'm Not Your Babe* (1995-1997), *Oh Lover Boy* (2001-2005), and more recent stitch art, sculpture and installation. In these works Franko presents himself as a ghostly child - a figure seemingly trapped in time - whose sense of loss and yearning drip in scarlet across his blanched skin-canvas. Unlike in his previous work, however, it is no longer Franko who is bleeding but the boxing bag, dripping milk down itself, and over Franko's padded, gilded body and the performance space.

<Insert Figure 1>

Franko has suggested in interview that on one level the boxing bag can playfully be seen as a gold dildo or penis that he beats until it ejaculates (2016). But if evokes a penis, in releasing milk it also evokes a breast, such that Franko's actions stage a fight not only between ideas of masculinity and femininity, but sexuality and nourishment. *Milk & Blood* also references a much earlier work by Franko, the 2001 3.5-minute video of the same title, in which a young man (Josef Kleeb) drinks milk from a glass jar, dressed in blood stained vest and t-shirt. The video seems to play with our expectations of what is innocent and nurturing, and what is sinister and acceptable, by asserting a visual link between two

different bodily fluids – milk and blood. The title *Milk & Blood* echoes the biblical reference of milk and honey, which appears in the *Book of Exodus* when God tells Moses he will lead the Israelites to a land “flowing with milk and honey” (Chapter 33, Verse 3), and also the life of 13th century Saint Katherine of Alexandria, whose veins released milk rather than blood when martyred. But if a visual and conceptual link is insinuated between blood and milk, it is also successive in terms of Franko’s career: now milk, rather than blood, freely flows.

Writing about boxing photography, Lynda Nead suggests that the sport civilizes a fundamental human aggression, by mediating it through codes, rituals and rules. Boxing may be violent, but it is distinct from real-world violence, insofar as it is “regulated, held back; it is set limits rather than being excessive and beyond control” (Nead 2011: 310). Approaching boxing as a theatrical and spectacular phenomenon, Nead suggests, allows us to examine the “affects and aesthetics of violence and representation” (Nead 2011: 310). Nead may well be correct on this, but part of the complicated allure of boxing is that violent combat also has the capacity to undo this theatricality and spectacularity, through excessive force, bodily breakdown or the strain of corporeal impact and its remains, as we witness in Franko’s performance. As Joyce Carol Oates has suggested, boxing struggles to be a metaphor for anything else: “Life *is* like boxing in many unsettling respects. But boxing is only like boxing” (Oates 1987: 4).

In his writing on Franko’s earlier blood-letting work, Stephen Di Benedetto has suggested that it is chiefly organized around a “fluid dramaturgy” (Di Benedetto 2002: 4). Fluidity may at least be one aspect of this performance too, but I’d like to suggest that neither blood nor milk are the most distinctive performance referents here anymore, but sweat. As it pours from and over Franko’s body, across the glistening surfaces of his costume, the bag and the surrounding space, the performer’s copious perspiration mingles

with milk, becomes almost extinguishable from it. Both are elevated beyond the abject by shimmering in concert with the gold material surfaces. Indeed, in interview, Franko describes being drawn to gold for its radiance, wishing to harness its energy and optimism “to get of the ghetto and to make something of your life” (2016). If bloodletting in previous performances seemed to speak to Franko’s vulnerability, and even emit a call to care, here sweat seems to testify to the work involved in working through personal and cultural struggles and traumas, of making art and sustaining an artistic career. Sweat takes on a luminescent quality, which not only authenticates Franko’s labor in performance but his resilience over time, and that of those whose lives he evokes. It celebrates performance’s capacity to alchemize these experiences and matters into something altogether more precious.

<Insert Figure 2>

Fighting matters

Cassils is a Canadian-born, LA based transgender visual and performance artist, bodybuilder and trainer whose work explores violence enacted on queer bodies, and the labors of bodily-fashioning and preservation. Frequently exposed in performance, and the subject of their work, Cassils’s muscled body reveals corporeal transformation as an artistic and athletic enterprise, an ongoing experiment in form with the materials of the flesh. Despite the obvious strength of Cassils’s body in action, their performances are equally invested in exploring its fragility, by testing the limits of its capacity for self-definition and endurance.

One of their earlier works, *Cuts: A Traditional Sculpture* (2011-2013), is a multi-media durational artwork in which the artist uses bodybuilding and nutrition to develop a

hypermasculine frame, or approximately 23 pounds of muscle in 23 weeks. Reinterpreting Eleanor Antin's 1972 *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture*, in which Antin recorded the effect of crash dieting on her body for 45 days, Cassils's project generated video, photography and painting. In *Tiresias* (2010-2013) the artist presses against an ice-sculpture of their body, until the object slowly melts via convective heat (Wickstrom 2014). And in *Inextinguishable Fire* (2007-2015) the artist is set aflame, the action performed live and projected on video - in 2015 outside the National Theatre in London. All of these performed artworks involve elements of endurance and display, the artist's body working with and against the material and aesthetic effects of ice and water, oil and sweat.

Similar concerns feature in *Becoming an Image*, though in a much more obviously pugilistic form. This artwork was originally created in response to the ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives in Los Angeles, the oldest active LGBTQ organization in the United States, founded in 1952, and performed in the building. The archive contains over two million items, including books, periodicals and articles, art, film, video, photography and audio recordings; ephemera such as costume and records, and personal papers, including those of Laud Humphreys, Michael Kearns, Bob Flanagan and Sheree Rose. Cassils's response to the archive invites us to consider the fights of LGBTQ culture contained within it, but also their own struggle as a trans individual and artist. It also asks us to see the queer past not as a distant repository of the dead, but as co-existing with the present, demanding our attention.

Becoming an Image accommodates an audience, a photographer and the performer, with live performance, photographs, an audio track and 1500 pounds of clay. In the course of the performed art work, Cassils wrestles and sculpts the mound, dissolving distinctions between the actions. In this, the most obvious predecessor to Cassils's piece is Kazuo

Shiraga's *Challenging Mud* (1955), in which the performer both wrestles with and effectively paints across with a clay-covered floor. But Cassils's work ostensibly takes place in the dark, only broken by the flash of the photographer's camera - in a manner previously practiced by David Parson's dance performance *Caught* (1982), in which a photographic flash creates the impression that the dancer is flying. In *Becoming an Image* this photographic action has the effect of dicing the live movement into frames, which in their shock brightness and unpredictability, feel almost uncomfortable to register. Light pierces our eyes to communicate a sense of the out-of-sight violence enacted on queer bodies. It also conveys the sense that these bodies are being worked out of darkness by light. Performance produces the action, is the action, but photography and video recording make performance visible and documentable. According to Cassils, the performance aimed to "point[s] to the ts and qs often missing from historical records," and to "call[s] into question the roles of the witness, aggressor and documenter" (Cassils 2013), which can be variously mapped onto three participating parties.

Cassils engages the block of clay like an opponent, mercilessly punching it, kneading it, dragging it around. Clay, dust, breath and sweat swirl into the air and around the poised viewers, illuminated by shards of light. Cassils may be the human agent, but the material does not give in easily, resisting at every move. With Cassils's transgender body on display, on the one hand this looks like a scene of retribution, not of queers being violated, but of fighting back. But the block of clay, which measures roughly the same height and width as Cassils's own body, is also a double, so that everything done to it also seems like a form of self-infliction, or remodeling. What Jack Halberstam has described as transgender's "project of dismantling and remaking" gender binaries is forcefully enacted in Cassils's work, "a sculpting of flesh and molecular form" (2018). We are asked to view *transformation*

laterally, as an interrelated corporeal and artistic enterprise. This struggle is productive, insofar as we witness Cassils's self-made body make and unmake their mirror-material, recasting the line between art, fighting and life. The atmosphere also feels charged and erotic, with the effect of Cassils's intense work and feeling showing on and showing off their gleaming, athletic physique.

<Insert Figure 3>

Writing about the performance at Edgy Women Festival, Montreal (2013) in particular her subsequent encounter with the kneaded block of clay in museum presentation at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York, Amelia Jones claims that the clay captures a sense of the performer's intense labor, through its marks, smells, and the phenomenological quality of "having been made" (Jones 2015: 20).⁶ The clay works phenomenologically for Jones, and she recounts it "affecting my physicality, my sense of scale and (through identification) my desire to act or react in return" (Jones 2015: 20). It has absorbed human qualities, Jones maintains, has become a "hunk of clay-flesh" (Jones 2015: 20). Jones wonders, "Surely it smells of sweat? It has the texture of skin. It is a body to me. It reanimates Cassils's actions" (Jones 2015: 20). The quality of "having been made" pertains to the art object for Jones, but in its mirroring of Cassils and the artistic histories that surround them, it also communicates a sense of other lives and artworks having been made too. Having been made, but also, in its pummeled state, formed and reformed, beaten or even not quite conclusively made. For Jones, this visible labor shows the ways in which subject and object can become one, and how, following Bruno Latour, humans and non-humans are networked and enmeshed in one another (Jones 2015: 34). Cassils's clay may be understood as networked matter, as Jones argues, but it also bears the marks of unleashed rage and longing, not just to create art, but to pound out its hidden histories. Indeed, here

labor is very much the effect of activated desire – Cassils’s passions and those of the archival figures and artworks invoked, and even the queer bodies the performer can more broadly be taken to stand in for. This labor, and its erotic presentation, may well ignite the viewer’s desire, as Cassils’s energetic performance of work, and its stilled and moving images, arrests our attention.

This artwork seems quite obviously about the desire for bodily fashioning and representation, and the labors of enduring violence, transformation and survival. But central to its impact are the aesthetics and affects of sweat. At the outset of the performance, Cassils’s white flesh looks like the surface of a classical marble statue, which is gradually softened into life by perspiration, produced under the heat of lights and physical duress. (Some viewers report having sweat sprayed on their bodies.) Eventually, Cassils’s body, the clay, and the space in which they combat are glossed with the performer’s perspiration. In the interaction between Cassils’s already-exercised body, and the mound of clay, it is as if we are witnessing marble become flesh become clay become artwork; objects, bodies and histories moistened as well as lit back to life.

Richard Dyer discusses the effects of glowing or shining in photography and film for different gendered and racialized groups. Sweat tends to confirm the natural aggression and desirability of men, Dyer suggests, and the dirtiness of non-white skin and women. When idealized white women appear on photographs or on screen, Dyer proffers, they tend to glow with a light that suffuses the body, while working class or non-white women shine as if sweating. Dyer writes: “Idealised white women are bathed in and permeated by light [...] Shine, on the other hand, is light bouncing back off the surface of the skin. It is the mirror effect of sweat, itself connoting physicality, the emissions of the body and unladylike labour, in the sense of both work and parturition” (Dyer 1997: 122).⁷

Cassils's performed labour, and its photographed and filmed dissemination, seems to play around with these relations between gender, shine and glow. Sweat on skin, against clay, reflecting and refracting light in the saturated performance space is a byproduct of work that becomes an aesthetic effect that dissolves ideas of normative embodiment. The body leaks, shines and glows, becomes pliable and in turn makes malleable its clay body double. Dyer suggests that built bodies, especially white male bodies, are "hard and contoured, often resembling armour," defining resistance to "being merged into other bodies" (Dyer 1997: 152). But Cassils's sweaty performance disturbs neat distinctions around the conventions of male-female embodiment. Cassils's body is hard in its musculature but also soft in its porosity and pliability and when read through its clay body-double. It is shining but also glowing, seeping but evaporating, fixed but also transforming, in a way that materially draws attention to the varied historical bodily labors of queer cultural production.

<Insert Figure 4>

Working through to working out

Displays of working out, and perhaps boxing in particular, have historically been an important tactic in male self-fashioning. Broderick Chow traces their origins to the late 19th century, to the "physical culture" displays of weightlifting and strongman shows in popular musical hall entertainments. These theatrical shows, Chow suggests, sought to "spread their message of ideal health, fitness and manliness." (Chow 2017). But any body or identity dependent on repetitive action and display for its sense of integrity and authority might well be accused of being grounded in anxiety and uncertainty. In one sense, Franko and Cassils

location themselves within this tradition of male bodily and cultural production, in their presentations of fitness, skill and aggression. But they are not exactly projecting male bodily ideals – Franko’s body strains under the pressure, and Cassils both conceals and draws attention to their transgender identity in the use of breast bandages, for instance. Indeed, if anything we might say that masculinity is itself being worked through by being worked out – not produced but experimented with; built and unbuilt, as Halberstam might put it. Fighting does not affirm heroic masculine prowess, but rather masculinity is something to be fought with, manufactured, exhausted and even destroyed.

But as I’ve already indicated, masculinity or gendered embodiment are not the only referents here. Both performances, in light of the artists wider bodies of work and production contexts, ask us to see the fights enacted as both personal and cultural, of the present and past. These artworks are about work, and of work - art *work* in verbal rather than nounal form. In using boxing forms to physically engage with specific queer personal and cultural histories, both Franko and Cassils do so at the intersection of the psychic and material. That is to say, both are invested in the psychic and material effects of queer struggle and trauma, the manner in which they impact the body through channeled rage and exhaustion, and as I indicated at the outset, the ways in which these may some way be “worked through” by being “worked out.”

In the fifth edition of the American Psychiatric Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)*, Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) was removed from the category of anxiety disorders and placed under “Trauma and Stressor-related Disorders.” The shift marked an emphasis in understanding trauma as arising from exposure to specific events. While not all stressful events provoke trauma, the *DSM-5* definition of trauma requires “actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual

violence” (*DSM-5*: 271). This must be as a result of three qualifying types of exposure, the manual states: direct personal exposure, witnessing of trauma to others, and indirect exposure through trauma experience of a family member or other close associate. Without needing to claim that Franko of Cassils actually experience PTSD per se, in their work they enact an idea of trauma at the intersection of the personal and the cultural, and they invite us to step closer to witness it in their artworks, and to confront it among ourselves.

The most seminal writing on trauma and its treatment comes from Freud. In “Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through” (1914) Freud uses the term “working through” (sometimes given as working-through) to describe the process by which patients of psychoanalysis come to process their symptoms and adjust to new realities. If a patient cannot fully remember the past they repeat it in various ways, Freud suggests, via acting out and in transference. While Freud does not offer a precise definition of the term himself, Charles Roycroft describes it as “the process of getting used to a new state of affairs or of getting over a loss or painful experience,” using the example of “extended mourning [...] since it involves the piecemeal formation and in the understanding of symptomatology” (Roycroft 1968: 199–200). Psychoanalysis invites the patient to remember, through free association or acting out, to work through, as Adam Phillips describes it, “the paralyzing past to reopen the future, the potentially more satisfying future” (Phillips 2016: 375-376).

What we find in Freud’s account, and among its interpreters, is the idea that remembrance is a type of repetition which can also be a form of working through, largely taking place through free association and transference in the context of the analytic encounter, but of course manifest in daily and sleeping life too. That is to say, psychoanalysis does not exactly posit a binarized distinction between the mind and body, though it does posit narrative and verbal expression as its core targets and tools. As

Michael Guy Thompson suggests, working out should be thought of as work, a labor through “our resistance to be candid” (Thompson 1994: 200).

Deirdre Heddon has explored the centrality of traumatic testimony to autobiographical performance in the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries. She suggests that one of the main differences between performed testimony and psychoanalysis is that the former takes place in public and the latter in private: “Live performance is explored as a response to trauma that not only shares some of the effects of psychoanalysis, but which might also be usefully differentiated from this strategy given that performance is public rather than private” (Heddon 2008:14). I would add that in performance art and queer performance art in particular, the body, rather than the mind or narrative, often figures as the leading force of testimony and action, and in this regard has much to offer our understanding of processing pain and trauma.

In the performances by Franko B and Cassils, remembrance is not so much about creating a coherent historical narrative for the self as it is in psychoanalysis, but the material re-membering or putting back together of bodies and experiences in time and place. Physical training, rehearsal, and the combative gestures we witness in performance are the repetitions by which the past is given a future in the present, to paraphrase Phillips, in which working through is given as a form of working out, a reckoning which the whole body must undertake. It requires not only vulnerability, but a practiced and enduring resilience.

Recent studies maintain that trauma does not just belong to or originate in the individual, but rather can be inherited, either through psychic connections with family or even gene expression as according to epigenetic studies. As Mark Wolynn puts it, “Even when the person who suffered the original trauma has died, even if his or her story lies submerged in years of silence, fragments of experience, memory, and body sensation can

live on, as if reaching from the past to find resolution in the minds and bodies of those living in the present” (Wolynn 2017: 1-2). Franko’s and Cassils’s works also convey a sense of unresolved inherited pain – not just familial (which Franko’s previous work has explicitly addressed) or genetic - but cultural; passed down from the LGBTQ community, other marginalized figures with whom they identify, and those who would cause this injury.

The importance of the physical body to the experience and repair of trauma is increasingly confirmed by recent research. Psychiatrist and PTSD researcher Bessel van der Kolk, for example, argues for a centralizing of the body in discussions of and treatment of trauma, suggesting that while language is important to traumatic expression and recovery, so too is bodily contact - “trauma makes people feel like either *some body* else, or like *no body*. In order to overcome trauma, you need help to get back in touch with *your body*, with *your Self*.” (Van der Kolk 2015: 530) This perspective is affirmed by studies that extol exercise in processing trauma and regulating mental health emerging from scientific disciplines (e.g. Hegberg et. al. 2019), as well as claims made by somatics practices which are increasingly of interest to performance studies. Van der Kolk’s model of traumatic effect chimes with what many queer performance artists have long understood – that the body cannot be excised from the mind in any processing of the past, and that any kind of working through must also be a form of working out – a re-remembering and a retraining the body in the present. The pugilism of Franko and Cassils, in this regard, offers us two visions of bodily resilience and transformation, which cut across lines of age, embodiment and cultural context. It allows us to see the processing of pain and trauma as both a psychic and physical, emotional and material enterprise, with the emphasis on the physical and material in particular filling a blind spot in well-trodden psychoanalytic interpretations of what working through might entail. This process requires not only vulnerability in life and art, Franko B’s

and Cassils's work suggests, but practiced and enduring resilience.

What remains

Working out describes an approach to physical activity, but the phrase also suggests the freeing of a stuck object or problem – here injuries personal and cultural. In the case of Franko B's and Cassils's performances, when their bodies step out of frame following their actions, what we are left with materially is shimmering surfaces of pulp. To “beat to a pulp,” of course, is the expression used to capture a fundamental aim of boxing: to reduce the opponent to soft, amorphous matter. Pulp was an important category in Klaus *Theweleit's Male Fantasies* (1987), a psychoanalytic interpretation of the violence of the German Freikorps as they fought the revolutionary German working class, based on the language and imagery contained in the troops' diary entries and writings. The Freikorpsman's body is imagined as solid and sealed, while the Red Woman is wet and formless. One of the recurring substances which encapsulated this was pulp, which Theweleit claimed emerged “whenever the will to fight collapses” (Theweleit 1977: 394). Pulp is matter made soft by being broken down with force and moisture. For Theweleit, it is psychically associated with the fluidity of female bodies, and represents the dissolution of the male ego and form into pure matter (Theweleit 1977: 394-95). Something of the quality of pulp pertains to the products of both Franko's and Cassils's pugilistic art, most obviously discernible in the mess that remains spread across the surfaces and spaces of their actions. But the production of pulp - this beating *to a pulp* - is not just the effect of milk and clay, but the production of sweat: it both precipitates and conjoins it.

Sweat is not only produced by the body in action in performance, but it becomes an

evolving feature of performances' aesthetics and affects - the seepage that lubricates and the sheen that lights its material effects and mutations. Sweat's emission authenticates the effect of intense bodily work in the production of performance, taking on the qualities of a temporary skin that makes labour momentarily visible and palpable. This is work that Franko and Cassils do for us, the viewers, but also for those they work to bring to our attention. It impresses, too, a sense of queer culture's dutiful investment in the abandoned people and contexts referenced in the works. Oozing from the pressured seam where the physiological and the psychic intertwine, the perspiration on these queer bodies reveals them to be productively at work, but also erotically contoured and porous. Sweat is central to the aesthetic expression and affective experience of labour and desire in overdrive, invested in marking presence. In these performances, sweat emerges as a queer sort of bodily residue which channels the labours of queer embodiment and cultural production.

While I have already traced some the fighting bodies in performance history, we do not have to look too far down similar histories to encounter explicitly leaky bodies: Vito Acconci's semen (*Seedbed*, 1972); Carolee Schneemann's mucus (*Interior Scroll*, 1975); Ron Athey's blood (*Four Scenes in a Harsh Life*, 1993-1996); Andres Serrano's urine (*Piss Christ*, 1987); Marina Abramović's (and Ulay's) viral tears (*The Artist is Present*, 2010); and Ragnar Kjartansson's mother's spit (*Me and My Mother*, 2000-2015), to name a short selection. In these works, body fluids often have a queer resonance, transgressing bodily or relational norms. Abramović and Ulay's *Breathing in, Breathing out* (1977) is perhaps a seminal instance of artists testing the body in relationship to breath and sweat. In the work, the performers inhale and exhale each other's breaths, until they sweat profusely and pass out.

Theatrical performance shares an interest in sweat as an effect of bodily pressure and work – it is a central idea in Lynne Nottage's play *Sweat* (2015), for example, which

examines the impact of deindustrialization among residents in Pennsylvania. Sweating bodies recur throughout Tennessee Williams oeuvre too, often as a symptom and signal of sexual secrets and distress; or, as Shonni Enelow has recently argued, works to draw attention to the labour of theatrical production for actors (Enelow 2019). By and large, however, we either do not notice sweat in live performance or assume its invisible or covert release as an incidental byproduct of human activity. But when sweat does explicitly feature in performance, as it does in Franko's and Cassils's work outs, it captures a striking sense of the body's real-time physical and psychological pressure.

Sara Ahmed has described feminist concepts as "sweaty concepts," insofar as they "show the bodily work or effort of their making" (Ahmed 2013). She does so with reference to Audre Lorde's *Sister Outsider* (1984), in which the author recounts her experience as a black lesbian in a white straight male world, claiming that "in order to withstand the weather we had to become stone" (Lorde 1984:148). Lorde's statement appeals to Ahmed insofar it captures the cycle by which become hard: we build defenses to survive the relentless pounding on the surface of the body. Ahmed presents this a danger in terms of "making ourselves into harder matter, matter that will less easily shatter, we might harden ourselves from each other; we might in becoming less soft, be less able to receive each other's impression" (Ahmed 2014). We must, Ahmed cautions, "struggle not to let ourselves become too hard; we have to struggle to stay open enough to receive the warmth of an impression" (Ahmed 2014). For Ahmed this is challenge of living a queer-feminist life.

Ahmed's approach to sweat is primarily conceptual here: she embraces it as a metaphor for exploring the labor of producing social relations. In Franko's and Cassils's work, we can see its implications phenomenologically and materially at play: the hardness of fighting bodies is countered by the softness of the sweating forms, and the marks left on

their respective materials. Following Ahmed's line of thinking, we might think of sweat as forming a crucial feature of pugilistic performance's queer dramaturgy, that not only captures the labour of individual struggle and cultural production, but cautions against being relationally too hard and too closed, or indeed too soft and too porous. Exhausted bodies are vulnerable and resilient, and their seepage and sheen invites us towards a more sensual awareness of the impact of violence and occlusion on our bodies and others'. Performance transmits the impressions of others in history, while leaving its own distinctive mark.

I began this article by arguing that Franko and Cassils are invested in tackling residual individual and cultural battles in their pugilistic performances. Pugilism is the main means by which the traumas of the past enter the present, but the performers' sweat authenticates the labor of this work on an individual and cultural level, and serves as a temporary aesthetic skin that reminds us that while the pain of the present will quickly recede from view, it will not necessarily disappear. Performance labor, in all its vigor and messiness, is what allows these experiences to enter into the sphere of representation, while also resisting the capacity of a single mode of representation to neatly capture and contain them. If we agree that violence has been at the heart of queer struggle, then these performances can be taken to suggest that this aggression needs to be channeled physically as well as psychically to give it expression and meaning. Working through and working out are necessarily intertwined – a question of minds and bodies conspiring together in the performance ring of life and cultural production.

Conclusion

The history of queer culture is punctuated with fights – for rights, recognition and representation – and pugilistic queer performance emerges as both a practice and metaphor to register old battles that have receded from view, or which persist in some form in the present. This represents a passionate, physicalized reckoning with personal and cultural pasts, to assert the unfinished work of queer bodies, activism, and art. In Franko’s and Cassils’s performances, we witness the effort to wrestle queer bodies and histories back into life by making the performers’ own labor phenomenologically felt and materially apparent across their saturated bodies, artistic materials and performance surfaces. Old wounds, and sidelined people, places and practices enter representation through the work and the performers’ bodies. In different ways, these queer bodies are soft and vulnerable, but also resilient and transformative. They testify to the often unseen work involved in queer life, its pressures and achievements in the present and across history, and the need for ongoing artistic and activist intervention.

While dominant theories of trauma, which have also been popular within queer studies, have privileged working through as a primarily psychic function, the processing enacted in the examples discussed here is categorically a strenuously psychological as well as physical exercise. The queer pugilism of Franko B and Cassils not only emphasizes for us the ongoing importance of “the fight” and its associated traumas to performance art and queer culture, but calls for a recalibration of how we think about the relationship between the mind and body in relation to histories of violence, on the edge of paralyzing trauma and the horizon of dynamic change.

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¹ Both performances have had a number of iterations to date. I mainly draw upon London performances of *Milk & Blood* at Toynbee Studios (2015 and 2018) and *Becoming an Image* at National Theatre Studio (2013) as part of SPILL Festival, as well as photographic, video and written documentation.

² Brecht's partially written "Life Story of the Boxer Samson-Körner," his short story "The Uppercut," his planned novel on the 1921 Dempsey-Carpenter fight, "Das Renommee: Ein Boxerroman," and *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* also reveal an interest in boxing.

³ In the online abstract to his article on physical culture and the Edwardian strongman George Hackenschmidt, Broderick D. V. Chow aligns working through with working out although the idea is not pursued in the article itself. See the online abstract for Chow (2015) at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13528165.2015.1095910>, access 20 June 2019.

⁴ Other recent theatre works exploring boxing include Aiden Healey's *Pow* (1996), Frantic Assembly's *Beautiful Burnout* (2010), Gavin Kostick's *Fight Night* (2010), Charlotte Josephine's *Bitch Boxer* (2012) and Future D. Fidel's *Prize Fighter* (2015), though this is not an exhaustive list.

⁵ In a previous publication I explored these themes in relation to the sacrificial and self-abjecting aesthetics of Franko's performances, although I was much more attentive to the psychic texture of the work. See Walsh pp. 131-145.

⁶ Performance products sometimes become other artworks for Cassils. For example, a mound of clay produced by *Becoming an Image* was exhibited as part of their 2013 solo show at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York (*After*); as was a concrete, resin and bronze

mould (*The Resilience of the 20%*). A sound installation built around a clay mound incorporated sounds of the live performance (*Ghost*).

⁷ Anne Anlin Cheng also discusses the relationship between sweat and skin aesthetics in relation to the US-born French entertainer Josephine Baker in *Second Skin: Josephine Baker & the Modern Surface*.