

One of the most intriguing characters, though a static one, in the television series *Westworld* is a player piano: an instrument that plays to a rotating, perforated score. Referencing Kurt Vonnegut's debut novel *Player Piano* (1952)—a dystopian story of class struggle and superfluous human labor in a near-future age of full mechanization—the creators of *Westworld* seem to propose the player piano as an analog creature in a fantasy world otherwise occupied by robotic human replicas. These creatures' struggle for consciousness and emancipation from the brutality of human enslavement resonates with a long tradition of science-fiction narratives in which robots become aware of their own artificiality, and thus appear human. In both Vonnegut's novel and the widely popular television series, the player piano is the not-so-silent reminder of the first robot, revealing that the meaning of "artificial" lies somewhere between ingenuity and deception.

The player piano returns in Alexandra Bachzetsis's performance and installation *Massacre: Variations on a Theme*, on display in the Donald B. and Catherine C. Marron Atrium of The Museum of Modern Art, New York, January 17–31, 2017. The project consists of a two-

channel video installation projected during gallery hours and a series of evening live performances. In the performance part of the work, Bachzetsis imbues the bodies of the three female dancers with a choreography that oscillates between automated movement and animistic gesture. Bachzetsis displaces the bodies of her female performers in a continuum of opposing forces, drawing inspiration from such references as Igor Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*; images of women in the work of Dada and Surrealist artists including Man Ray, Marcel Duchamp, and Hans Bellmer; the vanguard choreographies of Trisha Brown and Simone Forti; Northern Soul dancing; and lesser-known influences including tarantism and La Sape dandyism. An original score for two pianos, one of which is a player piano, alternately dictates and follows the movement of the three performers; the pianos are actuated both by human hands and by the software that allows them to play the score autonomously.

The choreography of the three performers migrates in and out of the pulsating music coming from the pianos. In the beginning of the performance, the bodies follow the drone-like rhythm of the score—throbbing,



Alexandra Bachzetsis. *Massacre: Variations on a Theme*. 2017. Performance view, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, January 24, 25, 27, and 28, 2017. Performers: Simon Bucher, Mischa Cheung, Yumiko Funaya. Photo: Julieta Cervantes. © 2017 The Museum of Modern Art, New York



Alexandra Bachzetsis. *Massacre: Variations on a Theme*. 2017. Two-channel video (color, sound) synchronized with player piano, 22:25 min. Directed by Alexandra Bachzetsis and Glen Fogel. © 2017 Alexandra Bachzetsis

dancing, quivering, transitioning between the uncanny, the animalistic, the robotic, and the human. When the music abruptly stops, they continue to move in silence, as if the bodies can promptly function on their own, independent from their sonic technology. At several intervals in the performance, objects are introduced as subsidiary mechanisms or obstructions to the movement of the bodies: wooden blocks, a mirror, construction

gloves, nylon pantyhose. The performers move with and against these objects, curling around the blocks, sliding the mirror on the stage while configuring their reflection, parading around with the oversized gloves, and binding the body with pantyhose.

Bachzetsis's use of the objects is reminiscent of Bernard Stiegler's notion of the *technic* in *For a New Critique of Political Economy* (2010). Stiegler argues that mnemonic technologies external to the human mind—whether it be a photograph, a voice memo, the storage of our lives in social media accounts, the uploading of information into the digital cloud, or even a spellchecker—produce a divide between interior memory and lived knowledge (*anamnesis*) and externalized memory (*hypomnesis*). “[A]t once a poison and a remedy,” Stiegler situates the *hypomnesis* within the control that can be exercised through them in a fully networked and digital society (not to mention how the technology industry profits from our increasing dependency on these mnemonic depots).<sup>1</sup> Stiegler's *technic* is easily extended to the human body, as Paul B. Preciado demonstrates in his *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era* (2013), which includes an account of the use of testosterone on his skin for a period of one year, and the impact of this exterior



Alexandra Bachzetsis. *Massacre: Variations on a Theme*. 2017. Performance view, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, January 24, 25, 27, and 28, 2017. Performer: Lenio Kaklea. Photo: Julieta Cervantes. © 2017 The Museum of Modern Art, New York





Alexandra Bachzetsis. *Massacre: Variations on a Theme*. 2017. Performance view, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, January 24, 25, 27, and 28, 2017. Performers: Yumiko Funaya, Lenio Kaklea, Alma Toaspern. Photo: Julieta Cervantes. © 2017 The Museum of Modern Art, New York

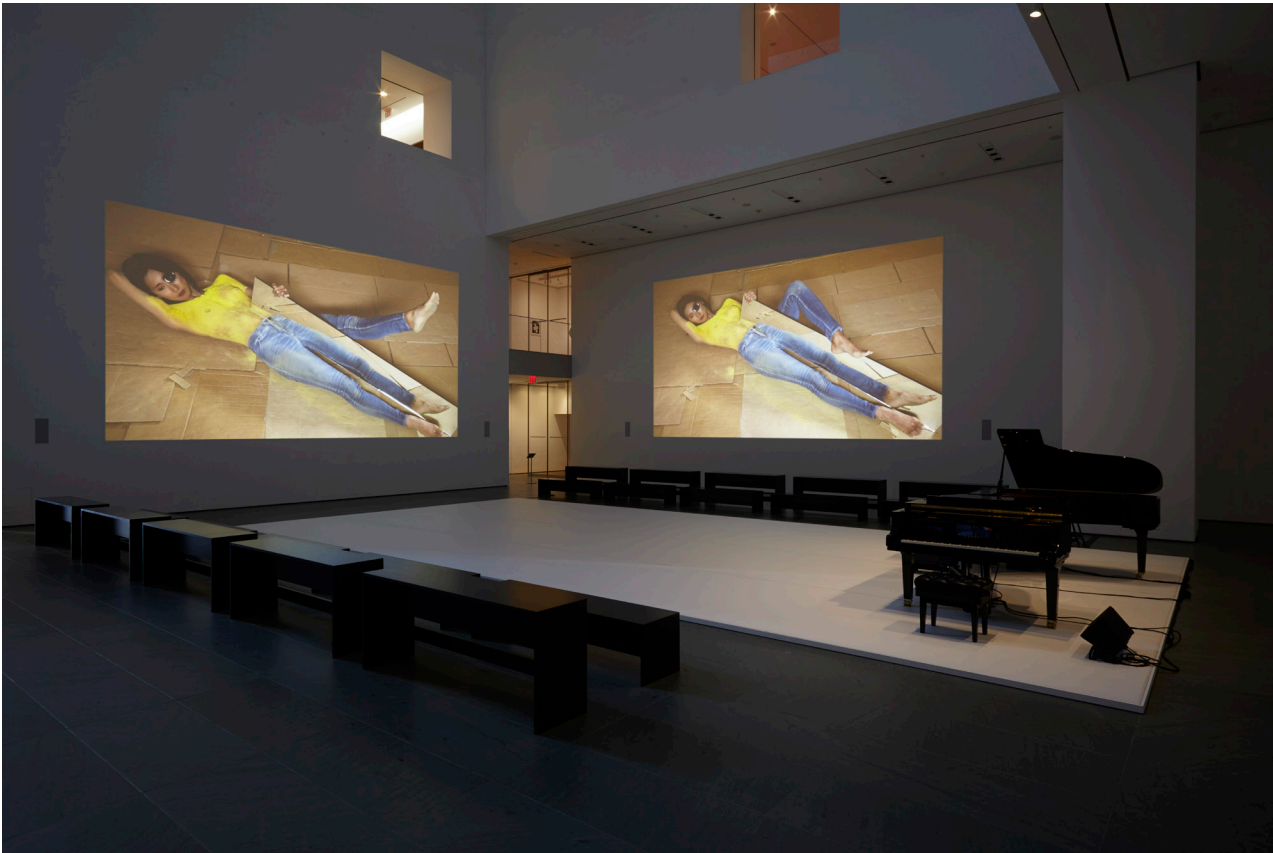
pharmacological technology on his own body.<sup>2</sup> The objects that are integrated in—and yet remain external to—*Massacre*'s choreography are physical markers of a longer line of inquiry in Bachzetsis's oeuvre: how our bodies align to the expressions, desires, fantasies, and identities inherent to popular culture. As in Stiegler's critique of the *hypomnesis*, Bachzetsis continues to challenge how our bodies—and, thus, identities—are affected by the apparatuses of the fashion, entertainment, pornography, and technology complexes.

Skin is another element that plays a vital role in both the performance and the video installation of *Massacre*. The three dancers continuously reveal layers of artificial skin as they shed garments, concluding the performance in a transparent nylon skin that leaves their human skin only slightly concealed. In the two-channel video installation, Bachzetsis emphasizes the relationship between artificial and actual skin even more. The bodies configuring their poses and positions on the cardboard surfaces and mirror slabs are covered in body paint. Images of clothing are painted and transposed onto the performers' skin, and the effect of gradually recognizing their bodily surfaces as *real* skin provokes an uncanny realization. At once our most public and private organ, skin is both a mask and a canvas. Its prosthetic extensions—clothes, cosmetics, silicone, hormones—enhance or cover up identity as if they were second skins, tailor-made for the user. Yet for all its illusory power, skin is a fragile and sensuous part of our body, which, when touched, produces arousal,

tension, anxiety, or fear, and gives away who we truly (think we) are.

The performative gesture of covering the body with paint in *Massacre* conjures up images of the female bodies covered in Yves Klein Blue paint to produce Klein's performance and painting series *Anthropometry* (1960). Though Klein rearticulated, or rather satirized, what art historian Amelia Jones has called the "Pollockian performative"—rearranging Jackson Pollock's action painting into a theatrical, physical, and public spectacle—the paint and the bodies performing the material were mere extensions of Klein's own body, used to detach himself from the act of creation.<sup>3</sup>

Conversely, when Carolee Schneemann uses her own body as an element in *Eye Body: 36 Transformative Actions* (1963), immersing her skin and limbs in the materiality of painting, or when Hannah Wilke covers different parts of her body with miniature vaginal sculptures made from chewing gum in *S.O.S. – Starification Object Series* (1974–82), the relationship between the artist's body (as a site of representation) and her self (as the creator of an image) proposes a powerful feminist commentary on how artistic agency and value are constructed along patriarchal lines.<sup>4</sup> While these historical precedents may converge in Bachzetsis's *Massacre*, the skin she introduces is a much more ambiguous matter, connected to a body that is projected as an exchangeable commodity, almost collapsing under the conditions produced by a neoliberal, disposable



Alexandra Bachzetsis. *Massacre: Variations on a Theme*. 2017. Two-channel video (color, sound) synchronized with player piano, 22:25 min. Directed by Alexandra Bachzetsis and Glen Fogel. © 2017 Alexandra Bachzetsis. Installation view, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, January 17–31, 2017. Photo: Peter Bulter. Digital image © 2017 The Museum of Modern Art, New York

society marked by the ironies of mass customization. In her use of body paint and the layering of fabric as second skins on the performers' bodies, Bachzetsis advances the body as a manipulable surface on which identity and physicality, as well as the technologies augmenting both, collapse into each other.

The player piano in the performance of *Massacre* is both a free agent and an obedient servant. It is preprogrammed to perform in a certain way, yet to the viewer the instrument seems to have a life of its own. At one moment midway through the performance, the piano player presses the keys of the piano, yet we hear no sound but the dry thrust of the keys themselves. The mechanism appears to resist through its muteness. And then, moments after, it is being played by the pianist in a way more familiar to us, only to later start playing by itself, a phantom presence overcoming the human accompaniment. Artifice is deceptive ingenuity. With the player piano, and many other elements in *Massacre*, Bachzetsis suggests a fragile balance between agency and dependency. Arguably, it becomes even more complicated when our identities—often claimed as the playground of freedom—grow dependent on *technics*, prosthetics, or other externalized sources.

However, in the final scene of the performance, the artist offers some form of release. The movement of the dancers is fully animalistic. The three bodies jump and creep toward the pianos, slowly mounting each other as they breathe to the pulsating score. They repose for a brief moment underneath one piano, seemingly exhausted, and then, wholly entangled, they rotate their way to the center of the stage, morphed into one being, until they release each other and walk away, no longer burdened. Unstoppable, the piano players continue their crescendo to a stage scattered with the technologies that shaped the bodies moving to their music.

Beyond the moment of nocturnal performance, the pianos continue to play during the daytime in the Atrium, governed by their program to emanate tones at a given time; the performing bodies are captured in the projection technology of the video installation and occupy the space as digital shadows. It is now technology that needs bodies—to listen, to watch, to perform.

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- 1 Stiegler, Bernard, *For a New Critique of Political Economy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), p. 29 and pp. 30–31.
- 2 See: Preciado, Beatrix, "Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs and Biopolitics," *e-flux journal* 44 (April 2013), accessed on January 8, 2017, doi: <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/44/60141/testo-junkie-sex-drugs-and-biopolitics/>. Or: Preciado, Paul B., *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era* (New York: The Feminist Press at CUNY, 2013).
- 3 Jones, Amelia, *Body Art: Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1998), pp. 86–89.
- 4 *Ibid.*, pp. 161–162.