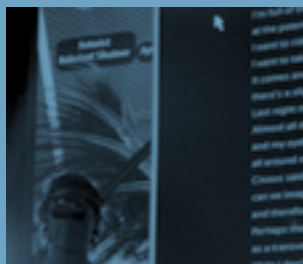Dorothy Santos

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Dorothy Santos

Marginalized Narratives of the Body in Contemporary New Media Arts

Figure 1.

Micha Cárdenas, *Becoming Dragon*, 2008.

The darkness and minimal setup of the computer lab—the site of Micha Cárdenas's mixed-media performance *Becoming Dragon*—indicate an exercise in sensory perception and deprivation. In the middle of this dark room, a figure stands bathed in red light, reminiscent of the color of blood. Bare feet and toes point like a ballerina's in first position. Hands and arms are slightly relaxed. Futuristic eyewear fits snuggly around the figure's head, pressing a section of short, wavy hair—it seems to purposefully obstruct the vision of the wearer. The head-mounted device and wires indicate the artist's confinement to physical space. To the right and left side of the body, wires stream down to the floor like multiple umbilical cords networked to the system of devices in the room. The two large projection screens show rooms in virtual space. The most striking and well-lit portion within the frame shows a mythical creature. The dragon, with its metallic skin and glowing features, appears to be looking outside of its frame. It seems to be waiting for the human beyond it to perform a gesture or move. The dragon is an avatar: it is an electronic representation of the human body that stands in the center of the frame.

In 2008 Cárdenas debuted her augmented reality performance *Becoming Dragon*. Although she conducted thorough research one year prior to her performance, the work was a risky endeavor. She knowingly subjected herself to confined physical conditions to explore different aspects of immersion into the virtual space. To briefly describe the platform, Second Life (SL) is a massive multiplayer, open-source, virtual world where users (or "residents") are invited to create avatars and socialize in environments created by and for other users. Residents are afforded three-dimensional modeling languages through the platform to express themselves freely, whether through fashion, body type, or even another species. As a way to destabilize sex, race, and gender constructions in the real world, Cárdenas used the virtual platform to engage with the public physically and virtually. As a way of engaging in political aesthetics to question the real-life requirements for gender reassignment surgery, she used SL as a medium for performance work.

The transgender experience remains one of the most marginalized human experiences in the world,[1] and as a result, transgender bodies are subjected to constant medicalization and marginalization. Moreover, these bodies are particularly subject to being mythologized and othered. With limited visibility of transgender bodies in mainstream culture, artworks such as *Becoming Dragon* aim to reach a diverse audience and reveal narratives of marginalized bodies. Virtual spaces such as SL also allow for socialization through language that requires understanding and dialogue that may not otherwise happen in

1. Suicide and unemployment rates among the transgendered community substantiate this claim.

real life (IRL). Through the various forms and configurations of identity in SL, online visitors were given the opportunity to better understand changes to the artist's physical body and transition through dialogue. Online discussions or chats took on an allegorical meaning, as well. The space that separates the user from the avatar becomes a transitory space of understanding due to a user embodying the language.

Softening the boundaries of digital and virtual technologies, Cárdenas's work offers an unorthodox use of virtual platforms that not only serves unorthodox use as a form of mediation, but also as an allegorical representation of becoming transreal. The term *transreal* refers to "crossing boundaries of multiple realities, a nuance for a multiplicity of worlds and the usage of reality as a medium."[2] Technology, specifically the use of devices and programming to disrupt virtual space, in *Becoming Dragon* shows the possibility of exploring the artist's concept of becoming transreal.[3]

From the way we outwardly express ourselves—whether through clothing or mannerisms—the reification of gender classification is often based on a binary and heteronormative structure. How does one begin to explore looking at the body in a way that is malleable and enables a much more fluid discourse around the limitations of gender constructions and self-expression? Virtual reality as a medium allows infinite possibilities for social, cultural, and racial expression that cannot be done easily in physical space. One of the objectives of this project is to examine Cárdenas's work on multiple levels of embodiment that serve as conduits for dialogue about marginalized bodies—more specifically, the body of a transgender woman of color.

IRL, the transgender body may vacillate between feminine and masculine, but ethnicity becomes another facet of identification and representation. More often than not, the human body is subjected to the parameters of classification to one of these binary constructs, as well as performativity of one's culture. Yet what does it mean for a person to be deemed a legitimate body IRL? How does gender performativity online allow for different configurations outside of binary gender constructions? How do we begin to address and confront identity as seen through the lens of the imagination? I carefully considered and deliberately selected Cárdenas's work because of the many spaces she occupies and the boundaries she permeates.

While Cárdenas was not the first artist to use SL as a medium for artistic expression, *Becoming Dragon* served as one of the first performances of its kind. The piece incorporated multiple dimensions of visual and digital perception, from the perspectives of both artist and visitor, in multiple spaces. Artistic expression through virtual means, such as interactive websites, came not too long after the

2. Micha Cárdenas et al., The Transreal: Political Aesthetics of Crossing Realities, eds. Zach Blas and Wolfgang Schirmacher (New York: Atropos Press, 2011), 30.

3. As opposed to hyperreal or fully mediated, since the artist's physical body is tethered to the avatar through motion-capture and movement.

4. Amy Dempsey, Styles, Schools and Movements: An Encyclopaedic Guide to Modern Art (London: Thames & Hudson, 1999), 286.

5. Ibid.

6. Nicholas Lambert, Joanne McNeil, Domenico Quaranta, Art and the Internet (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2013), 194-95.

advent of the Internet in the late 1980s. Art historian Amy Dempsey notes the emergence of Internet art around the mid-1990s, when site users totaled roughly 5,000.[4] In her text *Styles, Schools and Movements: An Encyclopaedic Guide to Modern Art*, she points to persistent qualities of web-based developments: interactivity and the democratization of art.[5] The use of SL among artists enabled a quite unique trajectory for performance art.

In 2007 Eva and Franco Mattes recreated historic performance artworks in SL in a series aptly named *Reenactments*, from their series *Synthetic Performances* (fig. 2). For one particular performance, the duo recreated Marina Abramovic and Ulay's piece *Imponderabilia* (fig. 3). The Matteses created digital representations of themselves, unclothed, with instructions for gallery visitors to walk between the two naked avatars. Through the video documentation, the viewer can hear the clicking of keys on a keyboard—the sound of the artists engaging with residents through chat.

The Matteses's use of the Internet as a primary medium for exposing the multiplicity of the self through performance garnered much attention in contemporary new media and digital arts. In an interview with writer and curator Nick Warner for the compilation text *Art and the Internet*, the duo stated that they "can't really see the difference between our virtual and real selves. Each person is a complex mix of different, sometimes contradictory personalities, and each personality is to a certain extent constructed. . . . The point is you are not yourself, you are many."[6] Taking into account this notion of multiplicity, Cárdenas's *Becoming Dragon* also aimed to explore genders outside of male and female in an effort to illustrate the wide array of representations a human body could occupy within the virtual space.

The Matteses provide an alternative to IRL performance through virtual space; Cárdenas utilizes virtual space as a medium to perform for both of her physical and virtual audiences. Her *Becoming Dragon* performance occurred in tandem with her real-life gender transition, serving as a parallel meditation on bodily transformation. Gender reassignment surgery typically requires living for 365 days as the preferred gender expression, as well as undergoing hormone replacement therapy. In *Becoming Dragon*, Cárdenas's performance lasted 365 hours (approximately 15.2 days); she perceived her environment through motion capture and saw her immediate surroundings through head-mounted technology.

Aside from permeating boundaries set by physical constraints and real-world gender markers, the work straddles the lines of computation. Identity takes on multiple forms through the creator's imagination, thus allowing the artist a command of her representation

Figure 2.

Eva and Franco Mattes,
Reenactments (still), 2007–10.

Figure 3.

Marina Abramovic and Ulay,
Imponderablia (still), 1977.

that goes beyond stereotypical human and gender visual representations. But the overall work wasn't without technical difficulty and issues. The use of a stereoscopic head-mounted display (HMD) in conjunction with a motion-capture system demanded constant recalibration. Cárdenas mentions the rigidity of the human body, which made it difficult for the devices to truly mimic her movements.[7] Even with motion sensors placed strategically on the HMD apparatus and eight motion-sensor cameras spread symmetrically throughout the room, complete transference of data to the various systems was not seamless. This performance piece required daily maintenance to enable Cárdenas to fully engage with both her physical and virtual audiences—and perhaps more so with her virtual audiences.

Cárdenas used three core components that were foundational in creating a mixed-reality performance piece. First, the Emagin Z800 immersive HMD provided a visual experience, simulating immersion into the game space. The HMD was worn throughout the fifteen-day performance, except when she used the restroom or slept. Second, the Vicon MX40+ motion-capture system and software allowed the artist's SL avatar to mimic her motions and gestures. Third, a pure data patch modulated Cárdenas's voice to make it sound nonhuman (or less gendered) when she spoke to her audiences both online and in physical space for the duration of the performance.

The physical space—a mere three hundred and twenty square feet—contained multiple tripods and cameras, with faint natural light streaming in from an upper corner of the space (fig. 4). Visitors had the ability to sit in and watch Cárdenas during specified times, but they were subjected to seeing the rapid head movements depicted on the projections, which proved disorienting for visitors IRL.

Since *Becoming Dragon* was a one-time performance, the historicizing of the work brings to light the importance of the artist's perspective within extended periods in a visually immersive state. She was able to navigate a wide array of lands within minutes through the virtual environment that would not have been accessible in physical space. She described the landscapes and architectural spaces as "rich and detailed" through visual immersion. But to understand the magnitude and subversion of immersive technologies, such as the HMD and motion-detection equipment, it is important to recognize the photographs and documentation of *Becoming Dragon* as artifacts that provide a type of protocol for future endeavors in this field of experimental performance art.

Returning to the idea of temporality, endurance played an integral role in Cárdenas's performance. However, the work also served as a direct effrontery to a sense the artist was born with: sight. Cárdenas underwent extensive training to prepare her vision for virtual immersion.

7. Micha Cárdenas et al., "Becoming Dragon: A Mixed Reality Durational Performance in Second Life," in The Engineering Reality of Virtual Reality 2009, eds. Ian E. McDowall and Margaret Dolinsky, Proceedings of SPIE-IS&T Electronic Imaging, SPIE vol. 7238, 07 (2009). doi: 10.1117/12.806260.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

10. Cárdenas, The Transreal, 124.

For approximately seven months, from May to November 2008, she wore the immersive HMD in timed increments that ultimately resulted in her being able to wear the device for almost sixteen hours over the course of the performance.[8] Her surroundings for the fifteen-day performance resembled a makeshift bedroom (fig. 4), since the lab was to serve as both a performance space and living quarters. Not only did she have to endure hours of seeing through virtuality, she had to forego connection with the outside world. Her team of collaborators provided support by bringing her meals and attending to the technical aspects of the work.

During the performance, Cárdenas recited poetry (her own) and gave three public talks: "Gender and Desire in Virtual Worlds," "The Body in Transmission/Transition: Learning in Mixed Realties," and "Biopolitics and Self-Governance in Second Life."[9] For these public events, she used a pure data patch as a core component to the piece: An individual's voice is a unique identifier, marked by pitch, tone, and range. Cárdenas made an effort to neutralize any eccentricities in her voice by changing it to sound almost robotic.

The bright, almost piercing, red light of the motion-capture system highlighted Cárdenas's body punctuating the space (fig. 5), but projections of poetry that Cárdenas created during her period of transition and going through hormone therapy dominated the scene. The poem in figure 5 is titled "notes on psychoneuroendocrinology," and a particularly noteworthy excerpt emphasizes the importance of the voice modulation software used to steep the performance in a liminal space:

> Almost all day I remembered to speak at the top of my
> voicebox, and my eyebrows want to sit higher on my face,
> and all around my eyes, my muscles feel awake.
> Cixous said that woman must write woman's body as an
> insurgent act, can we imagine constructing and shape
> shifting as a kind of writing,
> and therefore as a kind of insurgency?[10]

As the excerpt suggests, *Becoming Dragon* served as an insurgent act. But it also required endurance, which played an integral role in the performance. Cárdenas underwent extensive training to prepare her vision for virtual immersion. Although calculated risk-taking is an inevitable part of the creative process, medical specialists warned Cárdenas not to engage in this particular endeavor due to possible neurological side effects such as dizziness, disorientation, flashbacks, and psychosis. Cárdenas was not deterred, though she did ensure that a psychologist and an emergency plan were in place prior to her performance. Her resistance to medical specialists' recommendation not

Figure 4.

Micha Cárdenas, *Becoming Dragon* (installation view), 2008.

Figure 5.

Micha Cárdenas, *Becoming Dragon* (still), 2008.

to engage in the visual virtual immersion was a way to test the human body's limitations.

For an artist, risk-taking and failure are inevitable parts of the creative process. *Becoming Dragon* signifies the time, space, place, and movement of the subject, but it also prompts the viewer to raise the question of where the subject lies, and whether or not this subject is a fixed entity throughout the viewing experience. The artist encourages the viewer to consider the manner in which perception is mediated by the devices and constructs that we choose to carry with us throughout our experiences, albeit unconsciously. We are left scratching our heads and wondering: is the subject the artist's body or her avatar?

Overall, *Becoming Dragon* presents an allegorical approach to understanding liminal space. Since Cárdenas's physical body is mediated through the technology as an avatar, the image of the dragon becomes a phantasm. In D. Fox Harrell's text *Phantasmal Media: An Approach to Imagination, Computation, and Expression*, he defines the term *phantasm* as an "image integrated with cultural knowledge and beliefs (which may be traditional, stereotypical, or otherwise representative of an ideology)."[11] Cárdenas selected the dragon based on the fantastical notion that these mythological creatures have been characterized as shape shifters with the ability to teleport through space. The avatar became a form of expression that sought to break the configurations of human representation or existing phantasms of the transgender body IRL. The performance epitomizes how virtual space can serve as a conduit for undoing binary notions of sex and gender through mediation of image and language in augmented performance. Virtual space provides an ample medium for creative expression to reveal marginalized narratives and experiences of the transgender body through the capability to express oneself even as nonhuman. In thinking about this transitional and transitory realm where identity, gender, and sexuality evolve and perhaps formulate, how does the visibility of a marginalized body come to the fore in ways that are memorable, impactful, and that work toward dismantling detrimental and threatening beliefs that continue to oppress the transgender body?

Harrell notes that phantasms rely on an epistemic domain in which worldly beliefs and knowledge begin to mesh with experiences and images.[12] To better understand the formation of a phantasm from various realms of knowledge, Harrell uses the well-known Clark Doll study, in which children were asked for their preferences between two dolls. One doll had pale, white skin with blue eyes and blond hair, while the other doll had brown skin, brown eyes, and black hair.[13] Documentation of the study resulted in 67 percent of the 253 participants selecting the lighter skinned doll on the belief that it was

11. D. Fox Harrell, <u>Phantasmal Media: An Approach to Imagination, Computation, and Expression</u> (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2013), 8.

12. Ibid., 12.

13. Ibid., 13.
14. Ibid.

a nicer looking doll.[14] Keeping the doll study in mind, the epistemic domain is the cognitive space where beliefs reside; this space, Harrell posits, involves specific elements (i.e., skin, eye, and hair color) that connote attributes in concert with beliefs around those elements (i.e., blue eyes look better, pale skin looks nicer). Harrell delves even further into formulating the idea of cultural phantasms, which are shared among a population or group. He states, "The cultural phantasm is based in an embodied, distributed, situated cognitive perspective." To further explicate the notion of a cultural phantasm, Harrell uses the artistic movement of Surrealism: He defines it much more clearly by describing that the "art movement of surrealism can be considered to be a cultural phantasm when the term evokes a pantheon of canonical works by artists such as Salvador Dalí and Joan Miró, accompanied by values supporting ideas such as externalizing subconscious thought along with a revolutionary social disposition."[15]

15. Ibid., 187.

As a genre or art movement, contemporary new media and digital art have quite some time to create values that support a collective consciousness. As we can see through Harrell's example, historical art movements bring about specific associations that help contextualize social, cultural, and historical action. Critical computing has the capacity to do this work, as well. *Becoming Dragon* incorporates the use of a phantasm (i.e., dragon avatar) that forces the viewer to challenge ideas of binary constructs through imaginative engagement. This engagement potentially can impact the creation of a cultural phantasm associated with the transgendered experience, as well as what new media and digital art practices can offer such a marginalized body.

Productive dialogue and performance bring the body back as an active participant as opposed to a mere surveyor of art. The "embodied, distributed, situated cognitive perspective" that Harrell sees as critical to creation of a cultural phantasm is present in *Becoming Dragon*. By allowing viewers to see the artist-performer's body in both physical and virtual space, and to engage in what Cárdenas calls "social feedback," she realized an "embodied" experience of transitional space. The multiplayer online platform and dissemination of information to a global audience lent the piece its "distributed" quality. And the fact that *Becoming Dragon* positioned the viewer in a place of curiosity with the potential to change an oppressive phantasm through social feedback, dialogue, and play fostered the "situated cognitive perspective." Imagination and curiosity about the unknown allow an undoing of beliefs and knowledge, a process that Harrell argues ought to happen in critical computing. As the output of an artistic practice within the arts and technology discipline, Cárdenas's work becomes a critical approach toward building what she references as "political aesthetic."

Her conceptual process also promotes consideration of how we look at a subject who is constantly changing or in transition. This correlation between the creation and revelation of a phantasm offers an incredible throughway to Cárdenas's work.

Cárdenas occupies virtual and physical spaces to foster cogent thought about change; *Becoming Dragon* serves as an extraordinary example of how art and technology can be used to effect positive social and cultural changes. The transgender experience entails extreme caution and self-surveillance in an incredibly patriarchal and heteronormative society. The narratives of marginalized transgender bodies have been silenced and obscured, but artists such as Cárdenas unravel stories of marginalization and incorporate art, science, and technology to not only question oppressive systems, but mandate visibility. Language—whether the programming that helped run *Becoming Dragon* or the poetry the artist performed—enunciates the thoughts that fuel the work.

Homi K. Bhabha postulates in his work *The Location of Culture* that language and the enunciation of a *You* and an *I* are at the nexus of formulating meaning. *Becoming Dragon* was a performance of language on many levels. From the programming to the poetry recited during her live performances, language enunciated and demarcated spaces. Even through the chat function within SL, users or residents must embody a particular identity; whether it is tied to sex, gender, or ethnicity, it is marked by the use of language and vernacular. The formulation of meaning then becomes the nexus for where constructs can start to be dismantled and recontextualized. An excerpt from another poem by Cárdenas, titled "notes on becoming, 2 mg estradiol," epitomizes transition as an inherent quality of everyone's bodily and life experiences:

> I am becoming someone else
> but aren't we all?
> always becoming
> creating false labels for moments
> that we're outgrowing as we speak them
> learning, creating, building, slipping into our new selves[16]

16. Cárdenas, The Transreal, 128.

Classification of one's gender based on performance and on one's capacity to live outwardly as that gender remains confining. Artworks such as *Becoming Dragon* promote dialogue around marginalized bodies. Although subjected to multiple layers of legitimization by not only the state and country, but by culture and society, the queer Latina, transgender body is a real body. It is a human body. It is a body that

deserves recognition, care, and respect. An artistic practice is one of the few realms across disciplines that can offer a foundation for expressing these truths, and for uniting individual and collaborative efforts to reconsider—and change—what privileges us, binds us, and restricts us from understanding.