



Radical (Dis)Identification

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Radical (Dis)Identification

Santiago Sierra's Double(D) Spectator

Andrés David Montenegro Rosero 

Produced in 2002 for the Kunsthalle Vienna, for *Hiring and Arrangement of 30 Workers in Relation to Their Skin Colour*, the artist Santiago Sierra (b Madrid, 1966) hired several workers to stand in a line facing a wall and to then be arranged in a scale according to the colour of their skin. According to the artist's description for this work:

The Kunsthalle Wien contacted thirty workers who had been recommended to them. They sought persons of various skin colours from very light to very dark to be arranged side by side. The persons were contacted by telephone and asked where they came from. From this, their skin colour was deduced. As soon as a sufficient number of people for the desired spectrum of shades were thought to be available, the persons involved were called together. The first 27 persons to arrive were arranged in their underwear with their faces to the wall. Those involved who had the appropriate mixture of white and colour turned up when the action had already ended. This can be seen in the result: the in between shades are missing.¹

For this work Sierra produced a pantone of racial shades. Because the workers face the wall, any full identification of their specific facial traits is prevented.² In one respect, the work echoed a police suspect line-up, as several individuals were juxtaposed in a line, one after the other, for the contemplation of others. Yet, contrary to the logic of identification that characterises the police line-up, Sierra's work, in keeping with his practice, provided a view of the naked backs of the individuals that rendered them faceless and generic. As such, the bodies of the workers were reduced to colour swatches to be arranged according to the logic of the project.

During the same year Sierra planned to produce a work for Klaus Biesenbach's travelling exhibition 'Mexico City: An Exhibition about the Exchange Rates of Bodies and Values'.³ According to the artist, for this

1 Santiago Sierra, 'Hiring and Arrangement of 30 Workers in Relation to Their Skin Colour', http://www.santiago-sierra.com/200212_1024.php, accessed 15 January 2016

2 Video available at: http://www.santiago-sierra.com/200212_1024.php

3 Klaus Biesenbach, 'Mexico City: An Exhibition About the Exchange Rate of Bodies and Values', MoMA P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, New York, 30 June–2 September 2002; modified exhibition shown at Kunst-Werke Berlin, 21 September 2002–5 January 2003, and at Museo de Arte Carillo Gil, Mexico City.



Hiring and Arrangement of 30 Workers in Relation to Their Skin Colour, September 2002, Project Space, Kunsthalle Wien, Vienna, Austria, photo: courtesy Estudio Santiago Sierra, copyright Santiago Sierra and VEGAP, Spain

4 Teresa Margolles, 'Santiago Sierra by Teresa Margolles', *BOMB – Artists in Conversation*, winter 2004, p 67

5 Patricia Martín, '0-2', in Klaus Biesenbach ed, *Mexico City: An Exhibition About the Exchange Rate of Bodies and Values: A Thematic Exhibition of International Artists Based in Mexico City*, P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, Long Island City, New York, 2002, p 48. This essay mentions and discusses the proposed work, although it never materialised. As the author of the text clarifies,

work he wanted to 'line up all the P.S.1 workers according to the position they occupied and photograph their backs'.⁴ The work focused on the employees working on the exhibition and invited all of them, including security guards, cleaning and administrative staff, curators, and even the director, to line up against a wall with their backs bare and be arranged according to their wages. As Patricia Martín recounts, 'For his action at P.S.1, Sierra photographs the bare upper-back of each museum staff member and then arranges the images on a panel according to skin colour and hierarchy.'⁵ Sierra's P.S.1 intervention sought to reveal the museum's racial and economic arrangement and how these were translated and embodied by the institution's workers. As its unrealised status suggests, the work proved to be too problematic for the museum.

Taking *Hiring and Arrangement of 30 Workers in Relation to Their Skin Colour*, Sierra's unrealised project for 'Mexico City: An Exhibition

she expected the work to be included in the exhibition and thus incorporated it into her text.

6 Claire Bishop, 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics', *October* 110, autumn 2004

about the Exchange Rates of Bodies and Values', *Line of 30 cm Tattooed on a Remunerated Person* (1998), and *250 cm Line Tattooed on 6 Paid People* (1999), this article explores how Sierra's artistic practice undoes the stable identification of the viewer by placing him or her in the double position of both master and slave, employer and employee. I posit that Sierra's works double the spectator's position of power and make visible the existence in the present of past hierarchical constructions. Contrary to Claire Bishop's reading of Sierra's work – which rests on the premise of what she calls a 'mutual moment of non-identification' between hired performers and audience members – I argue that there is also the possibility for the audience to identify *with* Sierra's hired performers as well as *with* Sierra as employer.⁶ I explore how this practice forces us to realise how, as contemporary economic subjects, we operate as hiring individuals – of others' bodies – and at the same time are *ourselves* individual bodies for hire.



Hiring and Arrangement of 30 Workers in Relation to Their Skin Colour, September 2002, Project Space, Kunsthalle Wien, Vienna, Austria, photo: courtesy Estudio Santiago Sierra, copyright Santiago Sierra and VEGAP, Spain



133 Persons Paid to Have Their Hair Dyed Blond, June 2001, Arsenale, Venice, Italy, photo: courtesy Estudio Santiago Sierra, copyright Santiago Sierra and VEGAP, Spain

7 Mónica Mayer, 'Arte y Política', in *Mexico City: X-Teresa Arte Alternativo*, 2002, quoted in Cuauhtémoc Medina, 'Recent Political Forms: Radical Pursuits in Mexico', Santiago Sierra, Francis Alÿs, Minerva Cuevas', *Trans* 8, 2000. For the artist and critic Mónica Mayer contemporary artists in Mexico 'are making artworks that have a strong political content ... but very reactionary ... Even worse, in my opinion, the work of Santiago Sierra, SS, as some call him, who, in theory wanting to talk about labour relations, exerts all the power derived from his sponsors, to hire people for them to undertake absurd tasks such as allowing themselves to be looked at like chimps in a zoo, watched by the pretty

RADICAL (DIS)IDENTIFICATION

Sierra's works have attracted severe criticism on many occasions. Accused of being unethical, exploitative or authoritarian, his practice has often been met with shock by both audiences and art critics.⁷ He has been accused of using and exploiting underprivileged people with the intention of making a profit by selling their effort as artworks and, therefore, endowing it with value beyond the actual cost of materials and labour. For example, in 1998, he paid \$50 to have a line of 30 cm tattooed on to the back of an unemployed person who had no tattoos, nor had any intention of ever getting one.⁸ For these critics, Sierra's practice is nothing less than the unscrupulous exploitation of generally underprivileged individuals by a historically privileged subject. To them, Sierra's work only reproduces the methodologies of economic exploitation as configured by the current capitalist system. As a result, his art is viewed as a non-critical re-enactment of power, worthy only of derision and cynical commentary, or used only as a counterpoint to laud artistic practices that seek the cohesion of the social tissue or a revolutionary, activist engagement with political issues. Some of these critics, at an international level, include Graham Coulter-Smith, Shannon Jackson and Grant Kester.⁹ In Mexico, Sierra has faced strong resistance from critics

children that attend to openings at the Tamayo ... assuming that what people are interested in the work is, like him, money'. Author's translation.

8 Santiago Sierra, 'Line of 30 cm Tattooed on a Remunerated Person', http://www.santiago-sierra.com/982_1024.php, accessed 15 January 2016

9 Graham Coulter-Smith, *Deconstructing Installation Art*, Brumaria, Madrid, 2009; Shannon Jackson, *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics*, Routledge, New York, New York, 2011; Grant Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*, University of California Press, Berkeley, California, 2004; Grant Kester, *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context*, Duke University Press, Durham, North Carolina, 2011. For a criticism of their positions and an account of the changing meanings of work at play in Sierra's work see Andrés David Montenegro Rosero, 'Locating Work in Santiago Sierra's Artistic Practice', *ephemera: theory & politics in organization*, vol 13, no 1, 2013, pp 99–115.

10 Mayer, 'Arte y Política', in Cuahtémoc Medina, op cit; Avelina Lésper, 'El arte contemporáneo es un fraude', *Eñe*, http://www.revistaenie.com/arte/arte_contemporaneo-fraude-Avelina_Lesper_0_1079892483.html; Avelina Lésper, *El fraude del arte contemporáneo*, Libros Malpensante, Bogotá, Colombia, 2015

11 Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, Les presses du réel, Paris, 1998, p 4

12 Ibid, pp 5–16

13 Bishop, 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics', op cit, p 67

14 Ibid, p 70

Avelina Lésper (more recently) and Mónica Mayer since 2000.¹⁰ Contrary to these accounts, I posit that Sierra's spectator is categorically denied any stable subjective position as he or she occupies, simultaneously, opposing positions: victim and executioner, employer and employee, master and slave. As a complicit witness and unwilling victim, Sierra's spectators are fundamentally and irreconcilably fragmented, and constantly shifting between opposite economically defined roles.

THAT IS NOT ME

In her important text, 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics', Claire Bishop launched a critique of Nicolas Bourriaud's notion of relational aesthetics. Bourriaud's model focuses on practices that propose different modes of interaction between the spectator and the artworks and that seek to stitch the social bond. Understanding art as social experiment, Bourriaud's theory promoted works of art that, in his opinion, 'outlined ... hands-on Utopias', based on a desire to 'prepare and announce a future world'.¹¹ The desire to 'model possible universes' and 'inhabit the world in a better way' drives Bourriaud's account of artists such as Félix González-Torres, Rirkrit Tiravanija or Carsten Höller. These artistic practices are praised for offering a range of 'services' or 'models of sociability' that aim to 'fill in the cracks in the social bond' or hope to 'patiently re-stitch the relational fabric' between individuals.¹²

Against Bourriaud's understanding of his theory as inherently democratic, Bishop posits that Bourriaud's relational aesthetics are driven by certain 'managerial' premises which aim at articulating an 'experience economy' in and through certain works of art. According to Bishop, many models of relational aesthetics 'seek to replace goods and services with scripted and staged personal experiences' which, contrary to Bourriaud's understanding, do not question the idea of a subject's wholeness nor what a community can be. Lacking any problematisation of the relationships they create, relational aesthetics, for Bishop, run the risk of falling into smooth compromising positions, where the subjects of the works accept a stable identification within an equally stable community.¹³ Against this model, she posits the notion of relational antagonism. Focusing on Sierra's and Thomas Hirschhorn's artistic practice, she champions artworks that place the viewer in more 'uncomfortable', 'uneasy' situations than the ones produced by works associated with relational aesthetics. Her account is based on a reading of Sierra and Hirschhorn through the political theory of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. According to Bishop, for Laclau and Mouffe, a 'fully functioning democratic society is not one in which all antagonisms have disappeared, but one in which new political frontiers are constantly being drawn and brought into debate'.¹⁴ According to her reading, 'a democratic society is one in which relations of conflict are *sustained*, not erased'.¹⁵ This problematisation, and sometimes wilful trespassing of the limits of what is accepted by society, is an operation she sees in Sierra and Hirschhorn's work.¹⁶

Her analysis of Sierra's *133 Persons Paid To Have Their Hair Dyed Blond* (2001) offers us a valuable first-person account of the work. Created for the opening of that year's Venice Biennale, the artist paid

15 Ibid

16 Ibid

17 'In the city of Venice there are a great number of illegal street vendors from different parts of the world: Senegalese, Bangladeshi, Chinese, and also Southern Italians. They were asked to agree to have their hair dyed blond and were paid 120.000 lire, some \$60. The only condition being that their hair be naturally dark. The procedure was done in a collective manner behind the closed doors of a warehouse, situated in the Arsenale, during the opening of that year's Venice Biennial. Although the number of people originally scheduled to take

120 000 lire (approximately £42.00), to each of the 133 street vendors – who are usually illegal immigrants from Senegal, Bangladesh, China or Southern Italy – to have their hair dyed blond.¹⁷ As a requirement for participating in the work, they had to have naturally dark hair and be willing to have it temporarily altered for a fee, as well as participate in the evening's events.¹⁸ According to Bishop, the work 'estranged' vendors (hired workers) and exhibition (art audience) and produced a 'disarming' effect that 'only subsequently revealed to her (me) my (her) own anxieties about feeling "included" in the Biennale'.¹⁹ In her opinion, *133 Persons Paid to Have Their Hair Dyed Blond* 'foregrounded a moment of mutual nonidentification ... which disrupted the audience's sense of identity'.²⁰ Sierra's work confronted Bishop with a radical economic and racial 'other', which prompted her reflection concerning the critic's position within the international artistic circuit and her relationship, as a member of the artworld, to economically marginalised subjects usually obscured by it. According to her reading of Sierra's work, the spectator does not identify with the protagonist of Sierra's work. This situation is summarised by the statement 'this is not me'.²¹ The recognition of such alterity, however, is responsible for a subsequent reflection



133 Persons Paid to Have Their Hair Dyed Blond, June 2001, Arsenale, Venice, Italy, photo: courtesy Estudio Santiago Sierra, copyright Santiago Sierra and VEGAP, Spain

part in this operation was 200, it was finally reduced to 133 due to the arrival of immigrants in a staggered way, making it difficult to calculate with precision how many people had already entered the hall. It was then decided to shut down the entrance and calculate the number by informal count. This caused numerous problems at the door, due to the never ending flow of people leaving or entering.' Santiago Sierra, '133 Persons Paid to Have Their Hair Dyed Blond', http://www.santiago-sierra.com/200103_1024.php, accessed 15 January 2016

18 Ibid

19 Bishop, 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics', op cit, p 73

20 Ibid, p 73

21 Ibid, p 79

regarding the configuration of the 'me' of the aforementioned sentence, which highlights the necessary exclusions and hierarchies involved in such definitions. According to Bishop, Sierra's work produced in the spectator a delayed moment of self-reflection based on a confrontation with a racial and economic opposite.

THAT COULD BE ME

Although Bishop's account of Sierra's work is important as it elucidates some of the reactions from the audience ('that's not me'), I believe it is not sufficient. Bishop's account categorically denies that there is the possibility for any identification from the audience with Sierra's hired workers or with Sierra himself. Assuming that all spectators of Sierra's works will not be able to identify with the racial difference and economic position of his workers, Bishop's account problematically buttresses a centred, white and economically privileged spectator.

Moreover, Bishop's perspective ignores the possibility of the spectator identifying with the artist, in so far as he or she can be enmeshed in practices involving the hiring of other bodies through remuneration. We can say that, in Bishop's account, the spectator's non-identification with Sierra's workers ('that is not me') can be translated to the non-identification with Sierra's role as a privileged subject, what Pilar Vilela Mascaró called 'Not in my name' that rejects Sierra's instrumentalisation of others.²² Bishop's account misses a fundamental aspect of Sierra's practice in which the spectator is placed in a constant dialectical oscillation between stating 'that is not me' and 'this is me'.

For one of Sierra's many unrealised projects, drafted for the 2002 exhibition 'Mexico City: An Exhibition about the Exchange Rates of Bodies and Values', the artist proposed a version of *Hiring and Arrangement of 30 Workers in Relation to Their Skin Colour*. MoMA P.S.1 in Long Island, Queens is affiliated to the Museum of Modern Art in New York and represents an important exhibition space for contemporary art. According to its online profile, MoMA P.S.1 'displays the most experimental art in the world' and is a 'catalyst and an advocate for new ideas, discourses, and trends in contemporary art'. According to them:

MoMA P.S.1 achieves this mission by presenting its diverse program to a broad audience in a unique and welcoming environment in which visitors can discover and explore the work of contemporary artists.²³

Sierra's P.S.1 intervention sought to reveal the museum's racial and economic arrangement and how these were translated and embodied by the institution's workers.

Contrary to Bishop's reading, Sierra's works do leave some space for the spectator identifying with hired workers based on racial and/or socio-economic terms. Although unrealised, we can imagine a spectator identifying with one of the bodies arranged by Sierra. In this respect, the whiter the spectator's skin, the closer his identification would be with the white subjects displayed by Sierra who are, in turn, identified as belonging to the higher economic echelons of the institution. Similarly, a darker-skinned

22 Pilar Vilela Mascaró, 'Not in My Name: Reality and Ethics in the Work of Santiago Sierra', in Lisson Gallery, ed, *Santiago Sierra: 7 Trabajos/7 Works*, Lisson Gallery, London, 2007

23 Official P.S.1 website: <http://momaps1.org/about/>, accessed 8 June 2015

spectator could perhaps relate directly his or her respective shade to Sierra's live tableaux.

Moreover, the spectator can identify with the generic subjects of labour displayed by Sierra, as they are both involved in a system structured by wage. While the economic remuneration received by the art audience may be higher than Sierra's workers, and the spectator may not identify racially with the workers, in the end both spectator and delegated performers *are* workers. Irrespective of the spectator's profession, as economic subjects he or she can also identify with Sierra's labourers inasmuch as they are selling their time, effort – their bodies – for a wage. We, as audience, also form part of the line-up.

Finally, the spectator could identify with the artist-as-employer as he or she is involved in an economic network commanded by remuneration and the reduction of others' subjectivities through payment. This identification *with* the artist, which implies Bishop's non-identification *with* the worker, positions the spectator of Sierra's works as an accomplice, an executioner, a master, of someone else's body and their time. Contributing to economic practices that reduce specific bodies to generic objects within a minimal arrangement, Sierra's works, simultaneously, position the spectator as employer and employee, autonomous and subjected.

SIERRA'S DOUBLE(D) SPECTATOR

Sierra's spectator, therefore, is caught in a fundamental ambivalence that undoes its purported stability as *either* employer *or* employee. Sierra's artworks thrust the individual spectator into a constant oscillation between what Bishop calls a 'mutual nonidentification' and what I am calling a radical identification, *with* Sierra's hired workers *and* with Sierra's position. Sierra's spectator is categorically denied any stable subjective position. Like the artist himself, the spectators duplicate vertical hierarchical relations of power while being subject to the same rules. Sierra's works reveal the impossible impasse of the contemporary economic subject caught in a double bind, as executioner of its own conditions of subjugation.

According to the curator of the P.S.1 show, the work was cancelled because:

We thought about this work of the employees according to skin colour, according to wages, income. People do not necessarily want to deliver this. People do not want necessarily to have Santiago Sierra leave the museum and they are forever on that photograph, put in a linear order. So, I think that's an understandable 'No' that people sometimes give him.²⁴

In other words, the curator argued that the employees themselves were not willing to be lined up and thus to be included in an action that revealed their exact economic placement within the organisational ladder of the museum and how this correlated to their skin colour.

Sierra, however, does not think that this was an 'understandable no', and calls the rejection of this work 'censorship'.²⁵ In an interview with Mexican artist Teresa Margolles he said:

24 *Art Safari* (Ben Lewis, director, 2005)

25 Sierra and Margolles, 'Santiago Sierra by Teresa Margolles', *op cit*, p 67

I suppose I was censored at P.S.1 . . . Of course they knew that if I did that, there would be a perfect gradation from white to black, because the people who work at the door are black, but when you go upstairs, the watchmen are more Latino, and at the top, it's the paradise of the white man. So they stonewalled, telling me I was trying to create a problem that didn't exist.²⁶

As Sierra's comments indicate, the artist hoped that his intervention would reveal an economic structure that reflects a direct correlation between wages and skin tone. The unrealised P.S.1 action hoped to make glaringly evident the racial and economic exclusions that operate within the contemporary art institution. The work materialised certain organisations of racialised bodies, power and money, which recalled nineteenth-century racist organisational schemes that had been – ostensibly – surmounted. In this respect, the work prompted a strong rejection from a purportedly democratic and progressive art institution. Sierra's project for 'Mexico City' was rejected because it sought to make visible that which usually remains hidden from the progressive and democratic façade of the contemporary art museum – its retrograde racial organisation. Sierra's practice forces the spectator to shift between opposed power positions and face persistent historical and hierarchical arrangements of bodies.

His artwork would have confirmed the spectators' participation in a system commanded by wage, which allows him or her to buy the time, effort and body of others, while putting his or her own up for sale. Under this rubric, the spectator is made to feel responsible *for* the subjugation of others through remuneration, guilty for participating in the radical reduction of subjectivity through wage. At the same time, he or she, as an economic subject who receives a salary, is also made to feel the victim *of* the same erasure of subjectivity prompted by remuneration. In this sense, the spectator undergoes an uncanny experience with the potential for disrupting the stability of the self.

In 1998 Sierra produced one of his most polemical works: *Line of 30 cm Tattooed on a Remunerated Person*. According to the artist, he:

... looked for a person who did not have any tattoos or intentions of having one, but due to a need for money, would agree to have a mark on his skin for life. This person received \$50 as payment.²⁷

Drawn by the remuneration promised after the fulfilment of the work, the participant in *Line of 30 cm* was turned into a blank canvas or page upon which a permanent, vertical, 30 cm, black line was inscribed.²⁸ The indexical trace left on the body of the worker, the line, symbolises and at the same time enacts a process of economic colonisation of underprivileged bodies. According to Marc Spiegler's account, *Line of 30 cm* was conceived as a reflection on 'how little money Mexican labourers got to perform gruelling work'.²⁹ Although the work was successfully realised, its very realisation 'shocked' Sierra.³⁰ He stated:

I thought it was impossible that I would propose this act to someone for money and that they would actually accept . . . Having a tattoo is normally a personal choice. But when you do it under 'remunerated' conditions, this gesture becomes something that seems awful, degrading – it perfectly illustrates the tragedy of our social hierarchies. So I knew intellectually that I had to continue with this concept. But I spent a year afterward not doing anything more involving people.³¹

26 Ibid, p 67

27 Santiago Sierra, 'Line of 30 cm Tattooed on a Remunerated Person', http://www.santiago-sierra.com/982_1024.php, accessed 8 June 2015

28 Rosa Martínez, 'Merchandise and Death', in Rosa Martínez, ed, *Santiago Sierra*, Spanish Pavilion, Venice Biennial 2003, Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores, Dirección General de Relaciones Culturales y Científicas/Turner, Madrid, 2003, p 21; Fernando Castro-Flores, 'Punished [Considerations of Santiago Sierra's Work]', *Exit* 12, 2003, p 63

29 Marc Spiegler, 'When Human Beings are the Canvas', *ArtNews*, June 2003, p 94

30 Ibid

31 Ibid

- 32 Martínez, 'Merchandise and Death', op cit, p 21
- 33 Santiago Sierra, '250 cm Line Tattooed on 6 Paid People', Santiago Sierra, http://www.santiago-sierra.com/996_1024.php, accessed 15 January 2016
- 34 Santiago Sierra and Hans Ulrich Obrist, 'Conversation', in Hans Ulrich Obrist et al, eds, *Santiago Sierra: The Black Cone: Monument to Civil Disobedience*, Reykjavik Art Museum, Reykjavik, 2013, p 49
- 35 Medina, 'Recent Political Forms', op cit, p 152
- 36 Ibid
- 37 Ibid, p 146
- 38 Video available at http://www.santiago-sierra.com/996_1024.php
- 39 Branding was a common practice during the European colonisation of the Americas throughout both waves of colonisation (XV to XIX centuries). Specifically, it was co-extensive with a vision of slaves (both transatlantic and Indigenous) as inhuman, as livestock. Slaves could be branded by a myriad of agents, such as the Crown, its private owners, or slave traders. In the United States, for example, and in particular in the South, slaves were branded if they had tried to escape in order to both inflict a gruelling physical punishment and to reassert the master's ownership. For more information on branding as punishment and ownership in Latin America see Frederick Douglass, 'The Horrors of Slavery and England's Duty to Free Bondsman', Yale University, <http://www.yale.edu/glc/archive/1081.htm>. Specifically point sixteen which reads: 'some of the advertisements which had been published by masters, for the discovery of runaway slaves, and in which they were described as having marks of the whip upon

As his account indicates, Sierra was surprised by the abnegation of will and autonomy on the part of the hired individual who decided to forego his capacity for making a 'personal choice' and accept being permanently marked. His statement also signals how remuneration gave a negative connotation to his action due to the fact that the worker's body had been hired, rented, or bought. As the first materialisation of what Martínez calls a 'two-fold submission – economic and aesthetic',³² the violence implied by *Line of 30 cm* startled Sierra. The ease with which a body had been effectively marked – without hesitation or much negotiation – surprised the artist who, as a result, decided not to involve people in his works for a short period of time.

By December 1999, however, Sierra had continued with the production of *250 cm Line Tattooed on 6 Paid People*. According to the artist, 'Six unemployed young men from Old Havana were hired for \$30 in exchange for being tattooed'.³³ The work was significantly different from *Line of 30 cm*, as it was staged in Havana, not in Mexico City, and required the temporary employment of six individuals, not one. Additionally, the line traced in Havana was horizontal, not vertical, and only continuous when the bodies were arranged one next to the other. Despite these differences, both works were structured around the same premise: remuneration. Similar to *Line of 30 cm*, *250 cm Line Tattooed on 6 Paid People* (Espacio Aglutinador, Havana, Cuba, December 1999) involved tattooing a simple, 250 cm line using waged labourers as its material support. According to Sierra, both carnal drawings, as they were simple lines, were 'minimum gestures' that 'provoke(d) a social relation in which somebody's paid to get tattooed and photographed'.³⁴ Just like the individual hired for *Line of 30 cm*, the subjects hired for *250 cm Line* also belonged to economically marginalised contexts, and were described by Cuauhtémoc Medina as 'coming from among the thousands the failure of the economy of the island has thrown into the streets to make their living in the black market'.³⁵ As Medina's account suggests, all of the individuals hired for *250 cm Line*, like the hired body in *Line of 30 cm*, did not have any 'previous tattoos, scars, piercings or adornment on their bodies' and were, as such, selling their 'virginal skins' for a fee.³⁶

According to Medina, for *250 cm Line* one of the hired youths said the following as a passing 'caustic riposte' during the action: 'So just like your ancestors, you [Sierra] come to mark Negroes on their skin'.³⁷ As the documentation of the work suggests, his remark was accurate as the bodies being marked were visibly racialised. In a particularly revealing moment in the video documentation of the action, we see the artist interacting with the young men while they are being tattooed.³⁸ In this particular scene, the racial differences are blunt and evident. Sierra, the employer, is a white, Spanish man whereas his employees are brown or black. At the very end of the video, we see the artist paying the individuals the promised \$30. One by one, they approach the artist who first counts from a large wad of money the appropriate amount and then hands it to each participant. This image embodies the hierarchies implied by the labour agreement and demonstrates the subjugating power of money. Importantly, as the participant's comment indicates, the work re-staged certain relationships of power that, by virtue of the colour of the skin and origin of the protagonists involved, recalled colonial practices. In this way, the works re-enacted past mechanisms of brutal bodily subjugation – branding – which had been, in theory, superseded.³⁹

them, as wearing chains on their legs, as being branded with the owner's name, etc. The process of branding was as follows: a person was tied to a post, and his back, or such other part as was to be branded, laid bare; the iron was then delivered red hot (sensation), and applied to the quivering flesh, imprinting upon it the name of the monster who claimed the slave.' This description is uncannily similar to Sierra's action. It is also worth noting a parallel development to Sierra's tattooing. In recent years, several people have decided to 'sell' their bodies as billboards allowing different companies to permanently tattoo their corporate logo (brand) on their skins. This phenomenon varies widely; people have been tattooed with radio station logos, dotcom companies, casino websites, real estate companies (even political candidates). *What* spaces on their bodies have been exchanged *for* is also varied, ranging from company stocks, to thousands and hundreds of dollars, to nothing.

Sierra's works demonstrate the existence of an economic reality principle that compels all contemporary subjects to occupy opposing positions of power at the same time. Importantly, his practice offers no alibi for his audience – his works constantly iterate that in our contemporary society subjects are not only victims *of* others' subjugation, but are also actively responsible *for* the subjugation of others. It is perhaps this relentless insistence on the economic, cultural and political violence perpetrated by his audience (and the artworld more generally) that has generated such strong reactions to the work of Sierra from art critics around the world.

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