Shields, Open Wounds, and New Landscapes: An Artist's Account of Creation

by Stephanie Gervais

I made *Shield* in 2014, while living between Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, Brazil. My friend Yuri modeled *Shield* in front of an old, decomposing house in Rio. My intention was that he would lift up the beaded, lattice-like structure and wrap it around his body, like a shield. Yuri was seventeen at the time. Strong, but not a bodybuilder. I didn't anticipate the work's weight; it was an enormous effort to lift it. Even as Yuri gripped one beaded end and pulled it upwards, a large section lay stuck on the ground. Two lines of beads split open in the middle, the fishing line snapping from the weight.

Stephanie Gervais, Shield*, 2014. Plastic beads and nylon thread. 52 x 100 x .5 in. Archival inkjet print, 19 x 19 i*n.

Recently, I have been thinking about composing more shield-like sculptures. The idea started as an image of a body bag composed of small, white, round beads that migrate between shades of white and off-white. A large opening at the top is lined with a single strand of gold beads. This opening resembles a wound as well as a vagina. This is where my body enters. I have been impacted so many times by heartbreak that the body bag is a form of not wanting to participate in the world—to be invisible, or disappear.

Now I imagine this new shield as a singular sheet, but perforated with gold-lipped wounds of all sizes. There is something tactically and emotionally satisfying about stringing beads and forming seams. They are reparative acts. The new shield is supposed to look messy, in crisis, like an unresolved, fractured aggregate—like life. The original Shield was included in my recent one-person exhibition Gulalhi.[1] It provoked the most questions; it was potentially out of place. I couldn't always articulate its place in the exhibition, or the ideas behind it, especially in relationship to other works in the show that documented concrete events—including the destruction of refugee campsites, and the presence of people I was close to who lived in these border zones.

Stephanie Gervais, Gulalhi *(installation view), 2018. Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery, Reed College. (Photo: Nina Johnson)*

American theorist Judith Butler ties vulnerability to bodily exposure—both to other people, and to power. [2] She writes: "Loss and vulnerability seem to follow from our being socially constituted bodies, attached to others, at risk of losing those attachments, exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure. [3] The bodies that I photographed and wrote about in these border zones were exposed, in particular, to power, or power-as-violence. These works testify to a violently disproportionate, politically-constructed vulnerability close to destruction and death. Yet, Butler also affirms that vulnerability and bodily exposure can constitute a resistance to subjugation and violence. A shield blocks the body, protects the body. What about a shield that is made of holes or wounds? It is terrible as a shield, but it claims its own structure, accepting brokenness. This shield, where its beaded slabs are secure, is woven carefully, expertly, but where it opens or branches, it gives the illusion of breaking, of "holding on by a thread"—of being made of holes.

Stephanie Gervais, Wallet burnt by the police*, 2018. Archival inkjet print on Dibond. 22.5 x 28 in.*

Once you've been broken so hard, I think, you stop breaking, but refract, dislocate—archipelagize. [4]

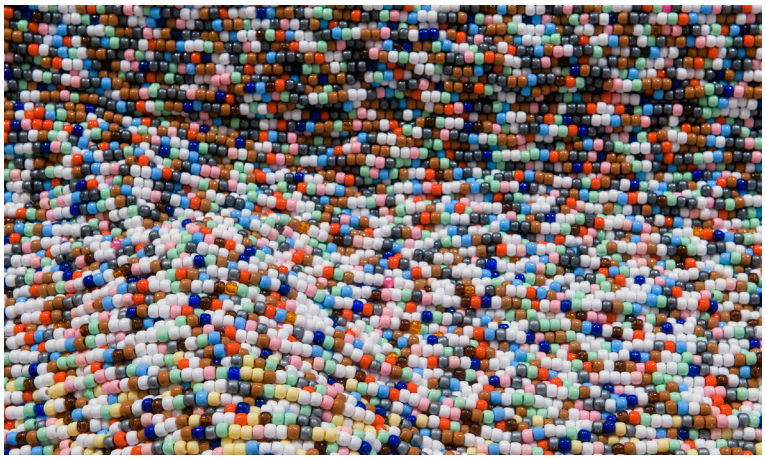
In Afghan performance artist Lida Abdul's film *In Transit* (2008), made outside of Kabul, a group of children play with an abandoned and decomposing Russian plane abandoned during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. The plane's metal facade is splattered with bullet holes—wounds—that the children fill with bunches of cotton. Watching the film, we know that the plane will never fly again, but we also think about the metal sheeting that once served as protection for whoever was inside.

Stephanie Gervais, Aziz*, 2018. Archival inkjet print on Dibond. 26 x 20.5 in.*

In the Afghan army, Aziz learned how to detonate bombs.
Sitting next to him on the couch, I am reminded once again of this closeness to death
and destruction
of eyelids, eyelashes, torso, voice being touched by
seeing
I am sitting with this closeness
You use a thin piece of wire, bent over, your arms come close to the ground
slowly lifting the dirt
until you find the active wire
It's easy, he says, his eyes skipping.

When you cross all borders, you forget everything, he tells me.
You forget selling fabric, or shaved ice, from village to village
You forget the ovular impact-marks splayed across your forearm
You forget each of the five times I've seen you cry.

I told you that when something breaks, when a cut appears, we need to fix it
I was talking about us but also about you
When you refuse to talk about it, it will grow and afterwards we can't close it.
After multiple bursts, the holes line up close to one another. It becomes a landscape or an archipelago, and the wounds are transformed into positive space.



Stephanie Gervais, Shield *(detail), 2014. Plastic beads and nylon thread. 52 x 100 x .5 in. (Photo: Nina Johnson)*

Judith Butler relates grief to dispossession, becoming undone, and being *beside oneself.* [5] In the exhibition *Gulalhi*, *Shield* evoked a territory made up of shifting, elusive patterns, reflecting the photographic landscapes in the space and suggesting the wounding of people and land simultaneously.

Sophie Ristelhueber, Fait #14*, Courtesy of the artist: http://www.sophie-ristelhueber.fr*

The photographer Sophie Ristelhueber photographs places and landscapes touched by war. Her series *Fait* (Fact) depicts the Kuwaiti desert after the first Gulf War from an aerial perspective. The photographs trace the marks of war on the landscape—in the form of craters, incisions, holes, newly embossed lines and pathways.[6]

Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe describes how colonial occupation rewrites spatial relations by ". . . seizing, delimiting, and asserting control over a physical geographical area."[7] This leads to the creation of boundaries, fragmentation, segregation, and the dispersal of people and land. Under colonialism, and what, more generally, Mbembe calls "terror regimes," people are hierarchized within social and spatial categories that are defined by varying degrees of violence, vulnerability, and disposability. Mbembe affirms that in precolonial Africa, it was human movement that determined and shifted space, not the other way around: "Space is a product of the way people move." In precolonial Africa, borders were porous sites of open relation and exchange. In contrast, today's border regimes—whether in Africa, Europe, or the Americas—structure and block movement.[8]

Stephanie Gervais, Campsite burnt by the police*, 2018, Archival inkjet print on Dibond, 26 x 20.5 in.*

"All of Afghanistan is blood. Many people don't have arms or legs." We are constantly looking at images of blood, bodies wrapped in white cloth. How can we speak about trauma when your entire upbringing, history, the things you have done and the ways you have moved through space, are all inseparable from violence?[9]

What is an emergency?

"Are they are trying to kill them?" my friend Ala asked, incredulous, when I told her stories of the homeless shelter of pod-like containers where my two friends were staying through the winter, after having crossed the border into the UK and been granted legal refugee status in the country. There were metal walls and a heater they could turn on for two hours a day. "This is about an emergency," she said.

Everywhere we go in Calais smells like fire, my clothes smell for days afterwards. Every night when _____ goes to "try"[10] he dismantles the tent, stuffs all his blankets in a black garbage bag.
I follow him up the hill, he throws it in the middle of some trees, where no one will find it, then dusts off his hands.
I cried when he told me his friend in Afghanistan was killed. He had been telling him to leave the army, but he couldn't find another job.

Stephanie Gervais, Old Jungle*, 2018, Archival inkjet print on Dibond, 20.5 x 26 in.*

What is an emergency?

An emergency is when people are subject to dramatic, continuous violence: corralled, partitioned, or permitted from moving freely and being somewhere without putting their life at risk.[11] In Borderlands La Frontera, Gloria E. Anzaldúa writes: "The U.S. Mexican border es una herida abierta [is an open wound] where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture."[12] Border zones are open wounds; and border culture—a culture of survival and resistance—is an outgrowth of these wounds—landscapes of eruptions, secretions, splits, heartbreaks.

"Never worry, never sad, never scared," he says. "When you cry, your heart can't be big. You wanna make your heart so big—then you never cry."
His heart is big because he is neither scared, nor greedy for experiences. What if you truly went all around the world with your heart that big, I thought.
But also, when I cry it is another kind of strength.

I have the right to be made of wounds.

According to Judith Butler, the language of human rights, based on integrity and self-determination, while necessary, does not reflect our primordial woundability. She writes: "[Human rights discourse] does not do justice to passion and grief and rage, all of which tear us from ourselves, bind us to others, transport us, undo us, implicate us in lives that are not our own, irreversibly, if not fatally."[13]

My new shields are punctured by holes that become positive space—topologies of experience that account for the negative and for breakdown. These openings are places where connection is lost, experience is suspended, diverted, uprooted, or untranslatable—places where we experience violence, grief, and undoing in gashes, gaps, bridges, and crevices.

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1. The one-person exhibition Gulalhi was on view at the Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery at Reed College from November 15 to December 23, 2018. "Gulalhi" is a word in the Pashto language of Afghanistan, meaning "flowers."

2. "How are vulnerability and bodily exposure related, especially when we think about the exposure of the body to power?" Judith Butler, *Vulnerability in Resistance*. (London: Duke University Press, 2003), 95.

3. Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. (London: Verso, 2004), 20.

4. I am inspired by Édouard Glissant's writings about creolization and archipelagic thinking: modes of thought and identity that are oriented around multiplicity and relation rather than boundedness or unity. The ocean around his native Caribbean archipelago is described as open and intersected; creating passageways that favor diversity, exchange, and implication—in contrast to the concentrated unity of the Mediterranean. The basis of creolization is the contact between cultures (which today defines the world) and this contact incorporates violence and loss as part of its history. Créolisation ingests and redirects violence.
See: Édouard Glissant, *Introduction à une poétique du divers*. (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1996), 14-15.

5. Judith Butler, "Violence, Mourning, Politics," in *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, 21-24.

6. Gérard Kouchner, commenting on landscapes in which people are always absent, writes: "Objects outlive men but they preserve their trace." Gérard Kouchner, "Objets inanimés, avez-vous une âme?" Le quotidien du médecin, 10 novembre 2016 p30, http://www.sophie-ristelhueber.fr

7. Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics" in *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 25, Duke University Press.

8. Achille Mbembe, "The Idea of a World Without Borders" YouTube video, 55:00, posted by European Graduate School Video Lectures, February 10, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fLRpH5RRwhQ

9. "Our psyches resemble the bordertowns." Gloria E. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 109.

10. To cross the border by entering into UK-bound commercial trucks from parking lots at night.

11. What Mbembe calls the management of the multitudes are: "...brutal attempts to immobilize and spatially fix whole categories of people or, paradoxically, to unleash them, to force them to scatter over broad areas no longer contained by the boundaries of a territorial state."

12. Gloria E. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987), 20.

13. Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, 25.

Stephanie Gervais is an artist whose work incorporates photography, sculpture, and language to focus on social crises, violence, migration, and spaces of cultural hybridity. She has shown her work in France, the UK, Brazil, and the US. She completed her MFA at Goldsmiths University, London, and her BA at Reed College in Portland, Oregon. Her work with specific groups of people has evolved over time, and is an expression of her long-term personal relationships. Her recent one-person exhibition—entitled Gulalhi*—was shown at Reed College's Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery, in 2018. Her installation was a complex conceptual portrait focused on the daily life of refugee camps in France. She was a teaching artist-in-residence at the Oregon College of Art and Craft in Portland, OR (USA) in 2018. www.stephaniegervais.com*

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