



Jorge, Jose Jr., Joseph, Joseph, Joseph

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The hardest part of Mary Coble's performance "Note to Self," at Conner Contemporary Art, wasn't the marathon, eleven-plus hour inkless tattooing session the artist endured. Rather, it was assembling the list of the names of more than 300 gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender victims of hate crimes that Coble had etched into her body between 6 p.m. on Friday and 5:30 a.m. on Saturday. This Washington D.C.-based photographer, video and performance artist conceived of "Note to Self" as a way to redress a stunning gap in crime statistic reporting in the United States.

A year ago, Coble began researching hate crimes and was shocked to find there was no centralized list of the names of those murdered for their gender identification and/or sexual orientation. Although certain organizations, such as the Southern Poverty Law Center and the Human Rights Commission, were able to give Coble some information, the artist realized that neither the federal nor most state governments mandated the reporting of these

horrible murders. The fact that as many as 75 percent of such crimes go unreported compelled Coble to dig deeper. Uncertain of what she was even going to do with the information once she found it, Coble doggedly set about compiling her own list until she had arrived at 348 names.

In the course of her research, Coble realized a common aspect of hate crimes: sickeningly often, murderers would carve words like "dyke" or "faggot" into their victims' skins. This led Coble to mark her own body with the names of the dead



Mary Coble, Note to Self. Courtesy of artist.

in order to offer a positive parallel to such viciousness. Coble was adamant in pre-performance interviews that she was not transforming herself into a living memorial for these victims: her list was not definitive, she used only first names and the words would fade from her body after a few months. What she did wish to do, however, was offer the viewer a visceral experience that would call his or her attention to a major human rights concern. In this, Coble succeeded.

The performance was painful to watch, if only for the immediacy of the buzzing of the tattoo needle, the welts and bruises that emerged on her skin and the resulting blood prints which were made and hung on the gallery wall after each name was inscribed. Much like "Binding," an earlier performance in which Coble bound her breasts with layers of duct tape and then slowly ripped it off, the effect of "Note to Self" was a translocation between artist and audience. It was virtually impossible to watch tattoo artist Lea Smith (who should also be commended for her endurance) etch word after word into Coble's body without imagining what the needle felt like. The transference was doubled by Coble's decision to use first names only: many viewers saw their own names plus those of lovers, friends and family members appear on the artist's back, legs and arms. This effectively personalized the performance and allowed Coble to diminish the sense of narcissism that too often plagues performance art.

At the same time, "Note to Self" raised questions about the aestheticization of political acts. Coble's performance garnered a tremendous amount of attention: the gallery was mobbed during the limited public viewing, and hundreds watched it from a live web cast, logging in from places as far away as Israel and Australia. The opening was dominated by talk of experiences of bias and violence; at one point, someone placed in front of Coble a bouquet and a small note that read, "remembering our dead." The atmosphere deepened initial skepticism about how the artist could possibly avoid presenting herself as a memorial to the dead. Yet to witness the entire performance in person was, in a sense, to watch the event transform from an eye-shielding act to a transfixing and beautiful spectacle. Smith assiduously applied row after row of names in neat block letters, the initial red anger of which soon tempered into a soft, velour-like pink. One became mesmerized by the poetry inherent in the repetition of the names, such as the chant-like lyricism of "Jorge, Jose Jr., Joseph, Joseph, Joseph" on her left arm. Coble seemed to metamorphose from skin over bone into aesthetic field, a transformation that ultimately introduced a tension between the distance of her body as an object and the tangible bodilyness of her performance. It is unclear whether positing this dilemma was her intention or whether it was an unwitting consequence of using herself as her medium. Certainly, offering her own self up for such inscribing was appropriate to the issue to which Coble wished to call our attention. At the same time, the evolution of what was unavoidably a politic act into an ephemeral work of art may underscore Coble's basic concern about what seems to be only cursory awareness of and limited concern for the victims of such rage. We are shocked, but then we forget; Coble is marked, but the names ultimately fade.