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THE ARTISTS

A 24-Hour Love Letter to Performance Art

Miles Greenberg walked on a conveyor belt for a full day. Here's what happened.

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In each installment of The Artists, T highlights a recent or little-seen work by a Black artist, along with a few words from that artist putting the work in context. This week, we're looking at a clip from the artist Miles Greenberg, who specializes in durational performance art and sculptural forms.

Name: Miles Greenberg

Age: 22

Based in: Good question.

Originally from: Montreal

When and where did you make this work? According to the time stamp on my iPhone note, I made the first sketches for this piece around 4:35 a.m. in my childhood bedroom in Montreal, at the end of April of last year. It was about one month into the five months I spent squatting at my mom's house after fleeing New York at the onset of Covid-19.

Can you describe what's going on in it? For this performance, I walked on a conveyor belt, nonstop, for 24 consecutive hours. I took no breaks of any kind (save for a 25-minute loss of consciousness around Hour 16). The piece was presented by the Marina Abramović Institute, who live-streamed it, and co-produced by the Phi Centre in Montreal, which lent me an empty theater and a camera team. Nothing was advertised beforehand; it was all word-of-mouth. At 4 p.m., all of the monitors in the Centre (including five street-facing ones on the building's facade) suddenly went black and faded into a full-body shot of me walking. It was visible from the street for all 24 hours. The soundtrack was a cello loop lent to me by Kelsey Lu and sampled from the first 24 seconds of her song "Hydroharmonia III, '432.'" It faded in over the first five hours of the piece and played at a consistent volume for the remaining 19. "Oysterknife" shattered my physical and mental limitations. It was very easily the single most physically and mentally challenging thing I had ever done. I've never gone through anything like that before. I can't say I had much of a plan going into it, yet for some reason it never even occurred to me that I wouldn't be able to complete the task. Whatever I thought my body was capable of before, I swear I quadrupled it over the course of one day.

I think the most shocking thing to me was the absolute desolation I felt upon reaching Hour 18, where I was met with the (at first horrifying, then joyful, then euphoric) realization that I didn't have a single thought left in my mind that I cared to solicit. I'd never even dreamed of what that moment could look like; there was literally nothing — nothing — left in my brain. Marina once highlighted a passage of Dostoevsky's "The Idiot" (1869), which I'd finished reading a few days before the performance, in which Prince Myshkin astutely describes the instant preceding an epileptic attack as one of extreme harmony, lightness and clarity. By Hour 22, that state had finally set in. The pain totally disintegrated and I think I experienced, for the first time, true inner silence. From there, I started to dance, which took me totally by surprise because I don't even remember deciding to do so. All at once, my subconscious had full reign over my motor cortex and everything became involuntary; it just came forth. I watched the footage two weeks later and I felt like I was reading my own DNA sequence, I don't know how else to describe it. In those last two hours, I could see my father, my mother and hundreds of people I'd never met.



A still from the recording of the work. Concept and performance by Miles Greenberg; presented by Marina Abramović Institute (MAI); produced by Phi Studios; sound sample by Kelsey Lu; shot at Phi Centre Montreal.

What inspired you to make this work? “Oysterknife” was my love letter to the performance art of the 1970s, and more specifically to the great Black pioneers of endurance such as Senga Nengudi, Pope.L and David Hammons. It felt frightening and very new for me to do something so pared down, but it also felt very urgent. In all of my other work, I wear masks; I always block out both my skin and my eyes. Endurance work, at a certain point, necessarily involves a degree of spectacle around bodily deterioration. Up until then, though, I’d always been extremely meticulous about how that deterioration was aestheticized through the use of makeup, contact lenses and scenography. This was my first time making an artwork without the visual veneer acting as a barrier between the audience and my body. I feel my Black body being consumed every day. I’m within my comfort zone so long as I have agency over the poetics of that consumption. But here, I wanted to let go of that, just to see what would happen. This is real physical pain — it always is — but this time, that pain isn’t wrapped up in metaphor, or delivered to you as a poem; it is a specimen. My greatest discovery during this process was that specimens are poetry, too. I come by both approaches honestly, and I still firmly believe the fantastical to be just as true to life as the mundane. I just think that (in my practice at least) the reality of Black existence needs more space right now than the imaginary.

“Oysterknife” was also heavily inspired by the Vodou rituals I witnessed on my last trip to Haiti around Fet Gede. Ahead of these ritual-performances, those assisting would lay mattresses along the ground because the priests and participants were expected to lose consciousness in the course of their practice. This was just a part of it. It totally changed the way I look at performance — it’s about dedication, and never questioning the necessity of a genuine impulse. When the intent is true, the physical body shall be no obstacle. I wish to live in a way that allows me to disintegrate like that, over and over and over again. That’s the only way I know how to grow.

What's the work of art in any medium that changed your life? When I was 16, I traveled to Naoshima, Japan, with my family. There, I visited the Lee Ufan Museum, which was designed by Tadao Ando. I fell madly in love with Ufan's work. He makes sculptures and paintings that are so spatially and atmospherically meticulous that they instantly bring the viewer into their senses. Each vast room contained only a handful of works, allowing each one its own little universe. There were no security guards. I remember coming across a darkened room with one stone sculpture and one painting under a spotlight. I sat down on the floor in the narrow space between the two (which, in hindsight, definitely wasn't permitted). I wish I could remember the name of it. Something about the composition struck me at my core and made me burst into tears. I have no idea how long I sat there weeping, and I still don't have the language to describe exactly what happened to me. I just remember knowing immediately upon leaving the room that, whatever this was, I was determined to dedicate my life to it.