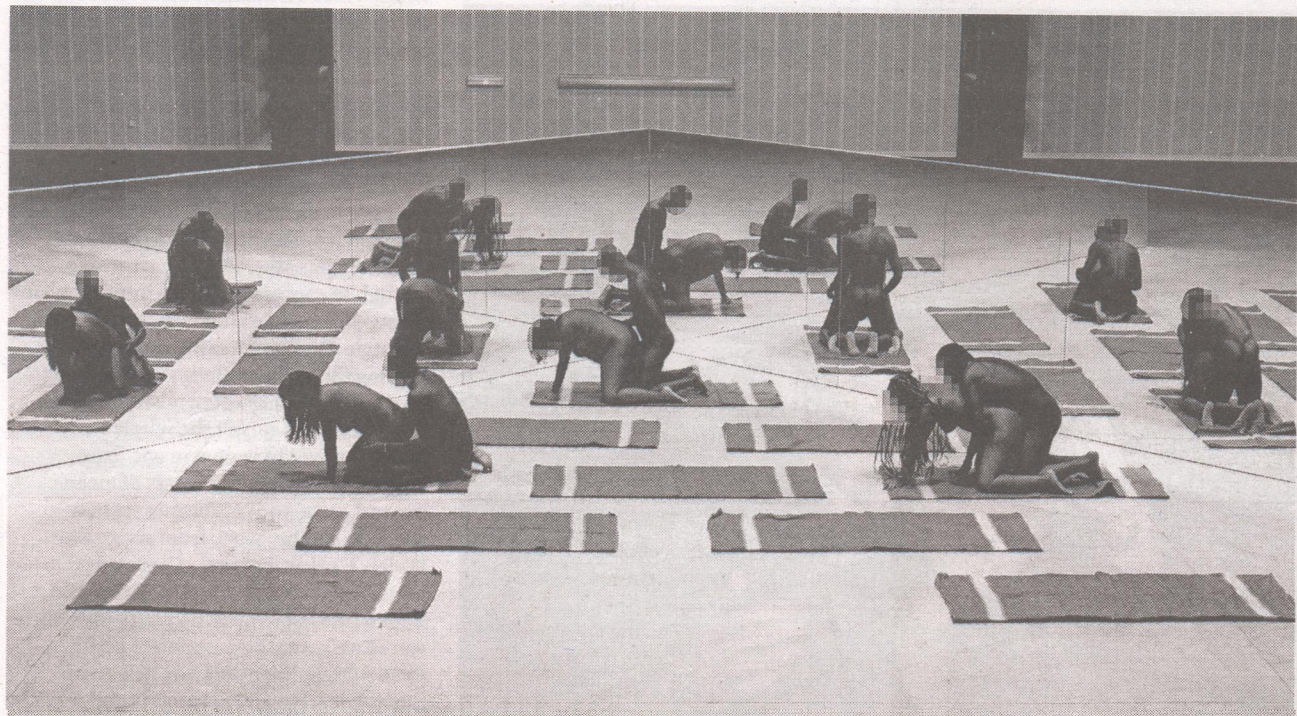


**Art**

**Butt Seriously**

Anal penetration and some strange doings down in Miami—two new video works



Courtesy Team Gallery and the artist

**Santiago Sierra:**  
**'Los Penetrados'**  
Team Gallery  
83 Grand Street  
212-279-9219, teamgal.com  
Through October 23

**Shadi Habib Allah:**  
**'The King and the Jester'**  
Reena Spaulings  
165 East Broadway  
212-477-5006, reenaspaulings.com  
Through October 17

**BY MARTHA SCHWENDENER**

In art, the body seemed to disappear in the past decade, along with everything else. Artists ditched objects in lieu of participation and became fascinated with ghosts. Even buildings could vanish, according to MOMA architect Yoshio Taniguchi, who famously bragged that, given enough money, he could “make the architecture disappear”—if not literally, at least into a neo-modernist, minimalist mirage.

In precincts where money is scarce, however, objects and bodies remain central to human existence. This is particularly true in recent videos by Santiago Sierra at Team and Shadi Habib Allah at Reena Spaulings. Although the artists approach their subjects from different perspectives, both show the body not as some dematerialized abstraction, but as a primary tool of commerce, politics, and power.

Sierra, a Spanish-born artist, has grown famous for creating works in

which people are paid to perform not just menial but completely pointless tasks: pushing heavy stones around a gallery, holding up a wall, or having a line tattooed on their back. He's often accused of exploiting his employee-performers, although his supporters claim he's using art's rarefied context to make visible how the global economy has driven millions to financial desperation, at which point they'll do virtually anything for money.

Considering his art-world profile, Sierra's work has been shown surprisingly little in this city. His last solo show was at Ace Gallery in 2002. The work at Team is not merely representative Sierra, however; it's extreme Sierra. *Los Penetrados* (*The Penetrated*) is a 45-minute black-and-white video shot outside Barcelona in 2008 and divided into “acts” that run through all the permutations of black and white men anally penetrating other black and white men and women. To spice things up, the work was made on Día de la Raza (Day of the Race), a Spanish holiday commemorating Columbus's discovery of the Americas.

Shot in a bright space with mirrors installed in a V-shape, 10 couples appear at a time, in serial progression: black men on white women; black men on white men; white men on white men; and so on. Sierra's rules for the project eliminated all but obligatory contact. It's not a love-fest; it's a paid gig. Faces are blurred in the video, further heightening the sense of mechanized repetition, sex without pleasure. If this were an essay on postcolonial

**Political sphincters:**  
**Sierra's *Los Penetrados***

geopolitics—which, in a sense, it kind of is—its thesis might be that everyone ended up alienated, automated, and fucked... except, for whatever reason, Asians.

Meanwhile, over at Reena Spaulings, relative newcomer Shadi Habib Allah's *The King and the Jester* uses documentary and scripted footage to place bodies in a more specific and localized, but similarly politicized, context. Shot in a body shop in Miami, it begins with a bit of disjointed dialogue: “Wonder how they fuck in their country?” one unseen worker asks another. “Same way like we fuck,” is the response. “No,” the first one says, “we fuck like animals over here.”

It's a weird exchange—and yet, not so weird, as dialogue and images mesh over roughly 25 minutes to depict how race and power are articulated in this scruffy, idiosyncratic workplace. There's the overdetermined masculinity of the body shop and the establishing of seemingly arbitrary hierarchies (what does it mean to fix a car “like a white boy”?). An ambiguously aggressive shoving match is caught on surveillance video. Customers show up, packing weapons. In one exchange, a worker describes Werner Herzog's *Grizzly Man* documentary: “He lived his passion,” he says admiringly about Herzog's subject, who was eaten by a bear.

The video ends with a fragmentary depiction: the aftermath of some unnamed violent act, complete with squad cars and

yellow police tape. The camera pans over the name “Bubba's” painted on the side of the brick building—a strange cultural juxtaposition, since we've already seen the Palestinian body-shop owner, actually named Babba, lying on a dirty couch commanding individual workers to massage “my fucking feet... like I teach you!”

It's not just class, race, and labor we're seeing in these videos, but also how these ideas are represented in various art-world spheres. Sierra's *Los Penetrados* is a Big Gesture, created in the context of a grand, biennialized career. It functions in performance/participatory art similarly to the monochrome in abstract painting: as an endgame. After all, what's left to do once you've represented every (binary) racial permutation of anal fucking?

As if to underscore the endgame futility implicit in *Los Penetrados*, Sierra is currently mounting “No, Global Tour,” in which large black letters made from plywood, spelling out the word “No,” are tied to a flatbed truck, driven around Europe and North America, and parked, according to his website, “in industrial zones and districts of workers.” He also ceremoniously buried 10 workers in Italy in February.

Allah is, in many ways, just warming up as an artist. But his video succeeds in areas where Sierra falls short. His workers speak, for one thing, whereas Sierra's serve as mute doppelgängers for entire races and classes of people. Allah, who is Palestinian (by way of a Columbia MFA), also counters the cleanly defined politics of, say, Emily Jacir, whose work frames Palestinians as victims. Unspecified scripting of episodes in Allah's video puts even more pressure on the already shaky construct of documentary film, and its ability to deliver the truth.

Sierra's work is notorious for baiting critics. Are we supposed to consider it on “aesthetic” grounds or assess his moral character? Most criticism of his work has leaned toward the latter, pondering whether his grandstanding gestures will implement change—as if that were the artist's primary job.

But the social-change angle is a tricky one. For while Sierra purportedly rails against the juggernaut of globalization, however you want to define it, his work ends up adopting many of its most basic strategies. Nuance is flattened into a kind of one-size-fits-all statement in *Los Penetrados*. Anal sex is treated as a singular act of power distributed among races, but its meaning—like art itself—really relies on its context: Violence might prevail on Rikers Island; pleasure, presumably, among consensual gays, heteros, and married men who frequent tranny prostitutes.

Globalization's greatest products disguise themselves as friendly and locally adaptable, serving your needs as effectively in Beijing as Beirut, while their success often depends on annihilating local difference. You'd think “critical” art on the international-institutional level might challenge this—and Sierra has, at times. *Los Penetrados*, however, leans toward the other, less promising model.