

Alter-Ego as Consumer, Theorist, and Producer: Cultural Studies as Art Production

Introduction: Contemporary Art Production, Interdisciplinarity and Cultural Studies

The fabrication of a fictional alter-ego is an interdisciplinary tactic useful for artists to authorize their engagement with other disciplines such as art history, art criticism, film studies, gender studies and with discourses surrounding race, class, feminism, and political activism. Shifting the discourse surrounding both production and reception to Cultural studies instead of remaining within a strictly art historical frame helps to make sense of the “surplus” matter generated by the production of these artists and permits an enriched understanding of the various functions they perform. By surplus matter I mean the “stuff” produced by artists, whether theoretical, critical, practical or material, that still falls outside of the roles generally ascribed to artists. Consider the following quote by the artist Andrea Fraser, whose alter-ego Jane Castleton will be one of the main subjects of this paper:

“I think of writing and research as part of artistic work. Unfortunately, I think the growing professionalization of both the artist and the intellectual (which has become almost synonymous with ‘academic’) has created a division between ‘writing’ or ‘thinking’ and ‘making’ that might be quite new”ⁱ

The professionalization Fraser speaks of threatens to constrain and disable the notion of interdisciplinarity which has become a discursive staple in the academy and the art world. Alex Alberro argues that Fraser’s writings “destabilize the increasingly rigid parameters of institutional discourse by calling into question the classification of writing into “creative writing,” “journalism,” “art criticism,” and “cultural theory.””ⁱⁱ

It is significant that both Fraser and Alberro struggle to situate Fraser's writings as late as 2005--Fraser on the one hand placing them in the context of her art production and Alberro on the other demonstrating their claim to interdisciplinarity; despite the ubiquity of the word interdisciplinarity in both academic and art world discourse, the term often seems to be misapplied or misunderstood. Even in the wake of Conceptual art and Institutional Critique that have incorporated a variety of representational practices since the 1960s, the act of writing, as an example, remains a much contested activity for artists. The richness of the notion of interdisciplinarity remains curiously untapped when it comes to discursive border crossings between the art world and academia. I am proposing to try to articulate how certain artists "perform cultural studies" and how Cultural Studies as a discipline is potentially a more accurate critical tool for both producers and critics alike than the disciplines of art history, visual studies or critical studies.

The following passage from *During* offers a concise description of the field of cultural studies and will serve as a starting point and rough template for my discussion of how these artists engage with the art world, the inherently interdisciplinary field of cultural studies, and the larger social world we inhabit. It is also helpful in distinguishing my specific interest in this field from say visual studies or critical studies due to cultural studies' particular concern with advocacy and politics.

Cultural Studies is engaged in three different senses, first, in the sense that it is not neutral in relation to the exclusions, injustices and prejudices that it observes. It tends to position itself on the side of those to whom structures offer least, so that here 'engaged' means political, critical. Second, it is engaged in that it aims to enhance and celebrate cultural experiences: to communicate enjoyment of a wide variety of cultural forms in part by analyzing them and their social underpinnings. And third, and this marks the real difference from other kinds of academic work, it aims to

deal with culture as part of everyday life, without objectifying it. In fact cultural studies aspires to join-to engage in-the world, itself. ⁱⁱⁱ

I would also add to During's description that of Cary Nelson who has described Cultural studies "as a ghostly discipline with shifting borders and unstable contents," and "it needs to continue being so."^{iv} Like many contemporary cultural studies practitioners, the artists I will examine are fans as well as critics of those institutions at the center of their production and analysis. While it may be true as a billboard for this year's televised Grammy celebration announced "we are all fans"; these artists, to quote Cultural theorist Henry Jenkins, are also "fans as consumers who also produce, readers who also write, spectators who also participate." ^vIt is this notion of fan activity, so important to cultural studies, as an object of study, as well as a self-reflexive position for producers that intersects with the art production discussed here.

The alter-egos I will discuss, Arthur R. Rose, Jane Castleton, and Taiwan adopted by the artists Joseph Kosuth, Andrea Fraser, and Kalup Linzy, represent three distinct generations of artistic production and include Conceptual art, Institutional Critique, and beyond, and reflect theoretical overlays onto the discipline of cultural studies since the 1960's and its subsequent and partial absorption into art world discourse.

I

Arthur R. Rose: asked and answered/more than just two hats.

The playful pseudonym Arthur R. Rose^{vi} adopted by the Conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth in 1969 offers an interesting place to begin. Playing on the name of Duchamp's character, Rose Selavy, Kosuth used the name Arthur R. Rose to interview himself as

well as three of his cohorts in conceptualism, Lawrence Weiner, Douglas Huebler, and Robert Barry in *Arts Magazine* in 1969. By adopting the name Arthur R. Rose, Kosuth was not only carving out a space where he could “self-interview,” he was also subverting the strict adoption of professional roles within the institution of art by playing the role of journalist. According to Alex Alberrro “Kosuth was a skillful advocate of his own work who acutely understood the value of public relations and self-promotion”^{vii}; he was in fact Conceptual art’s most outspoken spokesperson.

In the 1960’s and 1970’s artists such as Kosuth as well as Dan Graham, Hans Haacke, Yvonne Rainer, Martha Rosler and critics like Lucy Lippard were engaged in activities that incorporated institutional critique, political activism and theoretical concerns (Marxism, the Frankfurt School, linguistics and anthropology) into cultural production. Several were members of the Art Workers Coalition, a loose group of artists who staged protests at the Museum of Modern Art and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. While standing in opposition to the institutional model of the museum, specifically the Museum of Modern Art, dubbed in their literature the “Monolith Mausoleum,” (AWC 95) there is evidence of a growing self-reflexivity that crops up in some of their literature such as the slogan seen at one protest: “The Art Community is You.” This phrase anticipates Andrea Fraser’s declaration over 30 years later in an essay entitled ‘From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique’:

So if there is no outside for us, it is not because the institution is perfectly closed, or exists as an apparatus in a “totally administered society,” or has grown all-encompassing in size and scope. It is because the institution is inside of us, and we can’t get outside of ourselves.^{viii}

This emergent self-reflexivity combined with a Marxist critique of “the culture industry” and the discourse surrounding Conceptual art and the “dematerialization” of the art

object formed the context for Kosuth's performance. Arthur R. Rose was a symptom in 1969 of a condition Kosuth articulated later; in 1975 all of these influences crystallized more stridently in a short-lived journal *The Fox* published by a collective which included Joseph Kosuth, Ian Wilson, and Sarah Charlesworth. 6 years after the appearance of Arthur R. Rose, the following text from the cover of *The Fox Volume 2* articulates a collective position that helps to retrospectively situate the motivation for Kosuth's wearing of two hats.

“There is a whole constellation of specialized institutions in New York which by this time we all ought to recognize for what they are: immanently antagonistic to the possibility of a socially penetrating art. To make art a social act not a sham-historical psycho-individualistic one requires first a modicum of consciousness about the ways in which we have been conditioned to blindly participate in the world. It is truistic to say of this social act that it is “individually meaningful.” The current array of sanctioned “art problems” is mainly a function of the mad tendency to take specialization to the limit, to divide labor, to treat problems in a blindly analytic manner, to separate “art,” “politics,” and “private life.” This isn't just an art problem resolvable only by artists, it's a social problem, a problem of all artists, critics, laypeople, butchers, bakers and candlestick makers.”^{ix}

Kosuth's activities and discursive practices contain within them a reflection of the then emergent field of cultural studies as it was developing in the UK, which incorporated elements of Frankfurt School critiques of capitalist “mass culture” with “progressivist politics.”^x The appearance of Arthur R. Rose was born out of necessity in a highly specialized “art world” where Conceptual art was not yet institutionalized.

II

Jane Castleton or Mrs. John P. Castleton, retired, and Staff

Andrea Fraser was one of several artists who re-shaped Institutional Critique in the 1980s. The character of Jane Castleton, a museum docent deployed by Fraser in

performances from 1986 to 1989, is an exemplary instance of an artist performing cultural studies in an uncomfortable space between the art institution and the public, and between “high” and “low” culture; for the docent *is* the interpreter of high culture for the general public.

The docent as a representative of the museum Fraser explains “represents both the class interests embodied in the museum and its philanthropic purpose; the public good. She’s positioned in identification with the museum’s board of trustees and is in fact “the museum’s exemplary viewer.”^{xi} By embodying a multiplicity of subject positions in Jane Castleton, Fraser materially illustrates with humor, parody, and candor the conflicting constituencies that constitute the art world as an institution.

Concerning Jane Castleton, Art historian George Baker writes:

It is here, however, that the docent position produces its first dissonance, as identification for psychoanalysis at least—the desire to be something or someone else—is always predicated on what one is not; identification can never be seamless, total, or complete. In other words, identification testifies to a founding lack (of being). In the typical docent’s case, we face a “non-expert volunteer,” a position which “expresses the possession of a quantity of the leisure and the economic capital that defines a museum’s patron class.” However, it expresses only a quantity—potentially a rather “small quantity” – “indicating rather than bridging the class gap that compels her to volunteer her services.” The opposed psychoanalytic dynamics of identification and desire, being and having, collapse here, and within Fraser’s performances this will be only the first of such ontological cave-ins. The docent embodies a fusion of irreconcilable positions whose contradictions can never be satisfied.^{xii}

In several performances from 1986 to 1989 Jane Castleton performed the work necessary for Fraser to move among theoretical models; Lacan and psychoanalysis, Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu. “Museum Highlights” performed at The Philadelphia Museum of

Art in 1989 uses found texts combining institutional rhetoric with carefully researched historical accounts that situate the founding of The Philadelphia Museum of Art in relation to other 19th century institutions such as poor houses and prisons as part of a larger trend in public policy.

In this performance Jane Castleton's chatter moves between the 'to be expected' descriptions of the museum's period rooms to eyewitness accounts of a Philadelphia almshouse to a self-reflexive and I would argue "heartrending" description of herself in which the viewer who has read the work of Pierre Bourdieu (or not!) can feel the physical attributes of class encoding that cannot be erased by economic or educational capital burn into the body of Jane Castleton cum artist Andrea Fraser and construct Bourdieu's "habitus" before our eyes. Fraser's articulation works on an intellectual and emotional register that touches the viewer with Bourdieu's theory of "habitus" in a manner that tests, amplifies and supplements Bourdieu's thought. **Video clip**

Although Jane Castleton was retired by the artist after only 3 years, Fraser's subsequent work, I would argue, continues to work this difficult terrain in new and surprising ways. It is no surprise to find Bourdieu's foreword "Revolution and Revelation" in Fraser's book of writings. In and of itself the presence of this foreword and Fraser's answering "tribute" written in 2002 shortly after Bourdieu's death is some evidence of the operations I am proposing in this paper, simply put, meaningful discursive border crossings between the art world and academia. Fraser's construction of Jane Castleton was in step with cultural studies during the late 1980's and early 1990's where feminism, psychoanalysis and readings of theorists such as Foucault and Bourdieu were complicating and enriching the field of Cultural studies. And Fraser's self-reflexivity replaces the oppositional "us vs. them" rhetoric of previous decades.

Taiwan at the forefront of melodrama

Taiwan is a recurring alter-ego in an expanding group of characters performed by Kalup Linzy in formats that include soap opera and music videos. All voices are Linzy's voice

dubbed into the action whether physically performed by Linzy or other performers often friends and colleagues of Linzy.

Linzy's work successfully moves between cultural spheres and can be accessed through Youtube, gallery and museum exhibitions, cd's and cabaret performances. The art world, however, appears to be the site where all of Linzy's activities can comfortably co-exist and where Linzy has garnered the most attention, where his style of "independent one-person production" is most welcome.

The curator, Thomas J. Lax, has observed that "much of Linzy's work takes on a popular culture formula but breaks with its aesthetic slickness" and I would add in so doing exceeds the formula's constraints. Even while working within an art world context, Linzy, "creates his own field of reference" and understands "the complexity of popular culture lies in the audience's knowledge of previous similar forms and the intricate variations that are carried out" ^{xiii} on those forms in this case soap opera, music video and above all their interaction with melodrama. Linzy's project uses his position as a fan of popular culture to work over these forms and in the process reveal both their limitations and interest in relation to but not limited to queer and black culture. Thomas J. Lax in his essay accompanying Linzy's exhibition at The Studio Museum in Harlem, *If it Don't Fit*, describes Linzy's practice as follows:

Across time and place, Linzy reuses a cultural archive that is as enabled by defiant counter cultural moments as it is shaped by an American pop-culture history that leaves little room for people of color, gays or women to define or represent themselves. Cultural and performance theorist Jose Esteban Munoz has insightfully termed this mode of cultural negotiation and self-making "disidentification." For Munoz, "Disidentification" is about recycling and rethinking encoded meaning. The process of disidentification scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message's universalizing and exclusionary machinations

and recruits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications.”^{xiv} Rather than assimilate or resist, queer artists of color— and queers of color more generally—find a third way.”^{xv}

Kalup Linzy’s work can be seen to reflect what Jenkins, Macpherson and Shattuc have dubbed “New Cultural Studies.” They argue that:

“there is a growing sense that popular culture cannot be defined as simply progressive or repressive in its social role....Popular culture only “means” something in relation to other readings and readers. In the end, these historical and specific contexts of reception, the social positions of readers, and the specificity of form determine the politics and pleasures of popular culture.”^{xvi}

Through the scrambling of “disidentification” outlined by Munoz, and a complex mixture of pop cultural referents with subcultural referents Linzy works this edge where the popular is the “central vehicle of emancipation” as well as a “prime source of victimization.”^{xvii}

Like the performances of Andrea Fraser as Jane Castleton Linzy’s performances leave room for startling moments of emotional depth that reflect back upon the more polished and seamless institutions and genres they address such as soap operas and music videos as well as the contexts in which they are consumed. In the case of Linzy these contexts are diverse and complicated: they include the art world, the queer community and the black community. Linzy’s work offers the viewer a complex, and confusing array of identificatory positions. In an interview Linzy states:

“I was thinking about *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* in terms of my new music videos—about how images function in their day. Art and sexuality resonate differently in the black community. If I was just singing or creating for the mainstream, I would be constantly watering things down. As far as addressing issues in the black community, you can do that when you’re straight. If you’re RuPaul, who I love, then you’re most likely to be pigeonholed into just being queer. But if you’re Martin Lawrence, Eddie Murphy, or Tyler Perry doing drag, you get to be this black hero or icon. So that’s where things get a little complicated for me.”^{xviii} He continues: “I’m in the space I’m in because I can’t do what I’m doing and have it accepted in other communities.”

Linzy's process reveals the homogeneity and sterility of institutionalized forms while mining them for their history and richness. Linzy has pointed out that he needs "some off-ness. Taiwan is still walking around videos with his hair uncombed, you know? The audio doesn't pretend to be perfect; it actually can help maintain that raunchiness."^{xix} This off-ness, is crucial to the operations of Linzy's work, and not only supports "disidentification" with the slickness and limitations of pop culture but can also be seen to "disidentify" with established subcultural forms such as drag and camp and the generalized societal expectations of the queer community. In one video Taiwan does not accept Harry's marriage proposal and this moment is dissected through conversations with family and friends reminiscent of soap opera conventions while also subverting the conventional expectation promoted by news media that when permitted all gay people would choose to be married.

Linzy Video Clip

Conclusion

I am thankful that all of these alter-egos offer the viewer/reader what I think of as a wall of words. The reliance in the performance of these alter-egos on speaking and writing is the key to the excess meaning that requires acknowledgment through the field of cultural studies. The speaking subject empowered by this tactic refuses containment as an art object. I will end with a quote from the artist Mark Dion that offers some insight as to the different ways that artists "read" theory and engage with Cultural studies:

It is important to try to understand the difference between how art historians and literary critics use what used to be called Philosophy, and is now called critical theory or Cultural studies, and how artists use these ideas.

On the one hand, the demands of form and conventions of distribution often necessitate academic rigueur for writers, while on the other artists tend to use critical theory in a pragmatic mix-and match-method. There are other, more important reasons why an artist's relation to reading theory is different from an academic's. Artists are not interested in illustrating theories as much as they may be in testing them. This is why

artists may choose to ignore contradictions in a text, or may choose to explode those contradictions. The artwork may be the lab experiment which attempts equally as hard to disprove as prove a point. The artist may not be terribly interested in the object of an experiment but merely in learning the method. Critics improve the tools, artists improve their application.^{xx}

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- ⁱ A Fraser, *Museum Highlights: The writings of Andrea Fraser*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, 2005, p. xxii.
- ⁱⁱ A Alberro, (ed.) *Museum Highlights: The writings of Andrea Fraser*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, 2005, p. xxiii.
- ⁱⁱⁱ S During, *Cultural Studies: A Critical Introduction*, Routledge, New York, 2005, p.1.
- ^{iv} H Jenkins, T McPherson, J Shattuc, 'The Culture that Sticks to Your Skin: A Manifesto for a New Cultural Studies' in H Jenkins, T McPherson, J Shattuc (eds.), *Hop on Pop*, p. 30.
- ^v H Jenkins, T McPherson, J Shattuc, 'The Culture that Sticks to Your Skin: A Manifesto for a New Cultural Studies' in H Jenkins, T McPherson, J Shattuc (eds.), *Hop on Pop*, p. 30.
- ^{vi} A Rose, 'Four Interviews with Barry, Huebler, Kosuth, Weiner' in *Arts Magazine* (New York) 43, no. 4 (February 1969): pp. 22-23.
- ^{vii} A Alberro, *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity*, M.I.T Press, Cambridge, 2003, p. 26.
- ^{viii} A Fraser, 'From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique' in J Welchman ed., *Institutional Critique and After*, JRP/Ringier, 2006, p.131.
- ^{ix} From poster for *The Fox* (New York) #2 (1975).
- ^x S During, *Cultural Studies: A Critical Introduction*, Routledge, New York, 2005, p. 20.
- ^{xi} G. Baker, 'Fraser's Form' in Dziejwior, Y. (ed.), *Andrea Fraser, Works 1984-2003*, Kunstverein in Hamburg, Dumont Literatur und Kunst Verlag, Cologne, 2003, p. 56.
- ^{xii} *ibid*, pp.56-57.
- ^{xiii} H Jenkins, T McPherson, J Shattuc, 'The Culture that Sticks to Your Skin: A Manifesto for a New Cultural Studies' in H Jenkins, T McPherson, J Shattuc (eds.), *Hop on Pop*, p. 33.
- ^{xiv} J Esteban Munoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1999, p. 31.
- ^{xv} T Lax, *Kalup Linzy: If it Don't Fit*, Exhibition Brochure, Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, 2009.
- ^{xvi} H Jenkins, T McPherson, J Shattuc, 'The Culture that Sticks to Your Skin: A Manifesto for a New Cultural Studies' in H Jenkins, T McPherson, J Shattuc (eds.), *Hop on Pop*, p. 40.
- ^{xvii} *ibid*, p. 40.
- ^{xviii} K Linzy, Interview with Nick Stillman, *Bomb Magazine*, (Bomb 104/Summer 2008), p. 11.

^{xix} K Linzy, Interview with Nick Stillman, Bomb Magazine, (Bomb 104/Summer 2008), p. 11.

^{xx} M Dion, 'Field Work and the Natural History Museum: Mark Dion Interview' in A Coles (ed.), The Optic of Walter Benjamin, de-, dis-, ex-., (Black Dog Publishing, London) vol. 3 (1999), pp.39-40.