Spring 5-21-2017

Masquerade, Developing Artworks through Party Culture, and Disdain for the White Cube

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Recommended Citation
http://academicworks.cuny.edu/hc_sas_etds/194
Masquerade, Developing Artworks through Party Culture, and Disdain for the White Cube

by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements of the degree of
Master of Fine Arts Studio Arts, Hunter College of
The City University of New York

2017

Thesis Sponsor:

May 21, 2017
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Date
First Reader

May 21, 2017
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Date
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Dedicated to my chosen family.
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My mom’s closet was a panorama of the gym teacher uniform—a walk-in affair with double-decked rows of tracksuits. Those lines were broken by a brief pause of turtlenecks arranged by color. The closet was not only a reflection of her fastidious attention to organization, cleanliness, and detail—but evolved to reflect bigger changes in her life. A fur coat snuck in after her first divorce, soon to be followed by tight dresses with ever-shortening hem lines which would be let down after her second marriage a few years later. Once the second husband had been replaced by retirement and weekends of zydeco dancing in Louisiana swamplands, one closet became two. The first was for clothes, the second for a cowboy boot collection. Despite the persistent financial troubles that loomed over my childhood home, my sister and I were always dressed well. My mother grew up poor in rural Alabama and she imparted to us that dressing was an aspirational art. Whatever insufficiencies one harbored could be easily masked with a well-honed sense of personal style and a clean outfit.

That belief would be tested to extreme limits the summer I spent repairing Alexander McQueen lenders for the Costume Gala and steaming pee-stained Chanel suits as a dry cleaner seamstress on the Upper East Side. My mom didn’t answer my phone calls for a month. She was hiding from me. One day after work I ran all the way to Lexington Avenue to buy the new Time Out from a stand and flipped through the pages to find an exuberant nude photo of myself fucking a glittery pyramid in the “Best of the Weekend” section. It was a secret joy to know the announcement was there, only blocks from an employer who constantly bickered about the length of my dresses and strength of my deodorant. Over 30 and still closeted, I performed all across Brooklyn that summer, enacting in costume what I was too afraid to admit to my family as my sexual truth. My mom had her own secrets—undergoing seven plastic surgery procedures on
one blustery, July day. She finally answered the phone after she had sufficiently recovered over a month later, convinced I would shame her for her choices. In our own ways we were both using our outward appearances to manipulate what we couldn’t change or admit to ourselves. Plastic surgery is but another way of costuming the body—like corsetry, high heels, or control-top panty hose¹—but my mother’s alterations stung. We had once shared the same face, small breasts, and big thighs that had now been taken away with her procedures. I was angry at a culture so unimaginative it refuses to see beauty in anything beyond a monotone, impossible, youthfulness. I was resentful our face was wrong.

Those experiences concerning outward appearance are why I am thankful for the work of the artist, ORLAN. Since plastic surgery is our era’s impossible figure-altering fashion device, I very much consider her work to be within the realm of costuming. With protruding and otherworldly shimmering implants beaming at her brows and video-taped plastic surgery theatrics--ORLAN is asserting her own beauty standards and poking fun at supposed “good taste.” ORLAN’s plastic surgery performance works and digitally altered photographs are an obvious evolution from her early feminist pieces that use the body as an artistic medium. In a cultural moment when a woman’s appearance is still considered one of her greatest assets, it is pertinent for female artists to assert their own idea of glamour. Through costuming I elevate the expressions of elegance that I uphold.

“Insisting further on the theme of sex, men and women began to dress extremely differently from each other somewhere during the fourteenth century, having worked up to it rather slowly during the two before. After that, the borrowing of visual motifs across a visually sharper sexual divide created more suggestive interest and emotional tension in clothing than it

¹ Vincent, 167-173.
ever could have done when men and women wore similarly designed garments. Small suggestions of transvestism became more noticeable and more exciting.”\(^2\) This shift in dress is reflected in the advent of the first feminist theories put to written word within the same century.\(^3\) A great deal of social change occurred in fourteenth century Europe, including privatization of land and intensified urbanization.

By the eighteen century the masquerade ball experienced it’s peak in popularity. Already employed in everyday wear for over a hundred years, masks allowed playfulness with gender identity and sexuality as they never had before. Furthermore, women were allowed a degree of indifference to the advances of men that was not afforded in everyday life. Obfuscation of sudden blushing, blemishes, and beauty were all under the authority of the wearer. The ability to reveal and conceal the face proved to be a dynamic tool—one that gave women a rare upper hand in social interactions.\(^4\)

I have always been fascinated by the murky, sinuous divide between male and female. Costuming allows me to explore this contrast in a very impactful and expressive way. Exaggerated gender identifiers are an inferential visual language that have withstood the test of time. Fetishizing these idiosyncrasies locates my art squarely in the category of camp.\(^5\) I’m happy there, the progeny of a long line of campy queer ancestry.

* * * * *

All around me stood boxy strip malls—relics of a more prosperous time when the city had been bolstered by the Cold War’s Space Race. I was confident there was a brighter, stranger

\(^2\) Hollander, 33.
\(^3\) Kelly.
\(^4\) Vincent, 139-144.
\(^5\) Sontag, 4.
world than Huntsville, Alabama and I got glimpses through my television. I developed a secret obsession with the New York club kids of the early 90s. During the year of 1993, when I was 13-years-old, a slew of daytime talk show hosts featured the club kids, hoping to shock and awe their flyover audience. One sympathetic portrayal came from the Joan Rivers Show and introduced my first costume artist hero—Leigh Bowery. In this particular appearance Bowery is wearing what he referred to as a “pregnant tutu” covering his entire head. Leigh’s belly fat is hoisted up with a blue bra, buoyantly supporting his overflowing “breasts.” Joan delightfully questions, “Are you a man or a woman”. When Bowery reveals he is a man Joan asks if she can touch his breasts. As a girl growing up conservative Christian I was well-schooled in the virtue of clothing, how it would drive men to lust, but this was something else entirely. The potential to mold myself into something completely different than my everyday reality felt quite revolutionary.

As a young adult I followed Bowery’s lead, supplementing my income working at underground parties in New York. Lacking the confidence to perform, I participated in these events by selling food dressed as a drag queen. Aching for the adulation of the crowd, I eventually began performing in large-headed costumes that camouflaged my stage fright. These fetes were a panoply of earthly delights: modern dancers dragging a cardboard boat while misting the crowd with spray bottle sea spray, a weed brownie vendor, decorations of all varieties so thick you couldn’t tell how high the ceiling went, covert public blow jobs, and dancing until sunlight came. I was enthralled by the intense collective energy and the casualness of it all. Through parties I began to see the crowd as a canvas.
Documentation of artist-facilitated celebrations are limited. Even rarer are accounts forging a direct link between those occasions and an artist’s work. Thanks to the diary of Oskar Schlemmer the connection between his themed parties and recognized contributions to art history can be allied. Numerous photographs of Schlemmer’s costumed work have surfaced that are not linked to his known professional stagings. These snapshots are thought to be records of performance orchestrated in conjunction with celebrations mentioned in Oskar’s diary. His approach, a kind of work-shopping, lacked the extra stress associated with more formal venues. With a bare-bones crew and an audience of colleagues and friends, Schlemmer created an environment imbued with freedom and fertile for experimentation.

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Three wooden crosses are spaced out with the most considered, well-intentioned care and hang limply on the white museum walls. It felt obscene to see them this way— orphaned, sanitized, ostensibly boring. With this gesture Ogden Museum had perfectly demonstrated the grating aggressiveness of the seemingly “neutral” white cube. The work of W.C. Rice did not belong here. His three crosses should have been put back in his yard just outside of Montgomery, Alabama.

Rice’s property was something of a holy destination for young Alabamian artists when I was growing up. He owned a rural trailer park that stood on elevated ground looking down on the main road below. The cascading decline from the park to the street was littered with crosses mostly addressing sins of the flesh. This was a man obsessed with his obsession about sex. He was convinced that his impulse to make crosses everyday was a message from god. A

6 Chirico, 33.
7 Lehman, Arnold L and Brenda Richardson, 161-162.
photocopied pamphlet at the onset of the garden explained Field’s conviction. He wasn’t shirking the gallery system, this wasn’t a practice backed by complicated and academic philosophical theory—it was a calling put forth with what was at hand. The reason Rice’s art made sense in his cross garden, yet is garish in the Ogden is that his property is a fundamental feature of the work. During his lifetime, Rice’s work was primarily displayed against the ruddy background of a yellowing grass yard as a consequence of class—the only venue he had for practicing the art of converting his neighbors.

There is a violence to the white cube I can’t reconcile. It stamps down the messiness of life and cleans it up with a pedagogical air of superiority. It betrays all the embarrassing complication that drove me to make work in the first place, a history that I refuse to cover up out of shame.8

* * * * *

Reading about Walpurgis Night in an In Flight magazine on the way to Berlin, I recognized an opportunity to partake in a Czechoslovakian ritual that proceeded the dark foreboding of the fourteenth century—a genderless utopia of pagan ritualistic festivity. And so, I travelled to Prague where group of spritely hags pointed and smiled at me in a gesture of recognition as I de-boarded a streetcar at the foot of the city’s Old Town. Engendered with the mark of the witch via a hastily crafted mask of hairy warts and furrowed brow, I was taken in as one of their own. The witches frantically chattered in their foreign (to me) Czech as we hurriedly snaked though medieval alleyways, careful not to trip on the cobblestones. My cohorts were a bit drunk, late, and lost. Past several sharp turns and under a stony bridge appeared a wooded clearing of witches dancing in a circle to a drum beat while waving branches of evergreen above

8 Batchelor, chapters 1 and 5.
their heads. The drum led us down a path to a grander, more barren field where an unlit bonfire and onlookers waited. Words were said, firemen gathered, a life-size witch effigy was placed atop, and the bonfire was ceremoniously lit. The coven, at this point quite inebriated, danced lasciviously around the fire to the incitement of the crowd. This performance seemed to be a condoning of the hag, instead of the spring-cleaning via symbolic death sentence I had expected.

This experience made me wonder if it was possible to perform domesticity the same way. Is it okay to revel in the exquisite femininity of delicate lace drapes and scalloped fascias? What would my ideal village look like? Is it possible to settle and still hold on to my particular feminist identity?

I’m on the precipice of once again deciding how and where I want to live. Actualizing a portrait of the hallucination I envision feels like a good place to start. My village consists of buildings from my past, some that have played a large part in my life, others which I wish had. They are arranged through the gallery in cascading rows—mirroring an imaginary landscape. With each building is a story explaining its significance to me. Nestled within the installation, a video projection of the piece “Waiting for the Day to Come” shows the houses worn and animated by people sitting as a day passes. The sun rises and sets, a nearby brook bubbles, the wind picks up and lets down, a star shoots, and a robin flies by. During the daytime elements of the set are illuminated which would usually be hidden, bringing attention to the artifice of the scene. At night the extension poles and studio ceiling fade into the background, allowing the viewer to indulge in the fantasy of an imaginary landscape. Each building is an old friend—the village is the gathering of many places and the beloved people I miss residing within these locations. As someone who travels and has my greatest loves spread across the globe “Waiting
for the Day to Come” is a fantasy that I hold tight--despite its impossibility.

One of the most important qualities for the exhibition was it be infused with the energy and joy of my dearest people and places. I wanted a performance that took my experiences with different traditions of celebration and inserted them into the context of the New York City streets. The art had to enjoy a life outside of the gallery first—a parade! Several weeks before the opening night invitations with instructions for theme, meeting time, and place were mailed out to special guests along with masks. Invitations were handed out in person as well. The procession met at the Hudson River between Laight and Vestry where they were picked up by a marching band and the village buildings. As the sun began to set we walked through Tribeca to the wonder and amazement of surprised pedestrians before finally reaching the gallery doors. Parade attendees and the marching band entered first to open up a stage along the gallery floor. As the band played the house hats danced to their respective spots one-by-one and installed the pieces. At the conclusion of the performance all of my assistants/house art handlers came back onto the stage and enjoyed a final dance to celebrate the completion of my fantasy hamlet. I could finally rest easy knowing I had made my own place to call home.
Bibliography


Image List

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