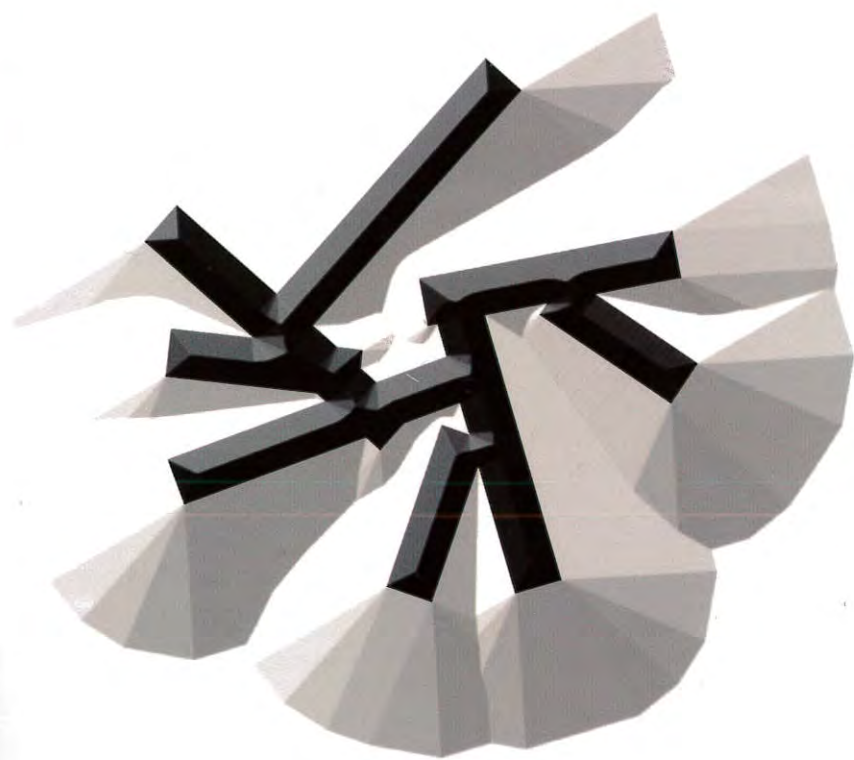


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ALEX SCHADY,
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PROTO-TOOLS 1 TRANSCRIPTION
16-17 NOVEMBER 2013
FLAT TIME HOUSE



**DAY 1
PROTO-TOOLS
SYMPOSIUM**

SOMETIMES DOING IS UNDOING AND SOMETIMES UNDOING IS DOING
ANDRÉS MONTENEGRO ROSERO

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COLOPHON

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SUBMITTED TEXT

CINEMA, STUDIO, TOOLS

MARK HARRIS

We are used to thinking of artworks being shadowed by copies, or being copies themselves – Sherrie Levine, Jeff Koons, Alan McCollum and others in the 1980s, influenced by Baudrillard, conspicuously initiated this process under the concept of appropriation. But what if for every artwork there were thousands, or millions, of versions, each of which slightly altered some aspect of its counterparts to the point where no original existed other than the one we were working on, the same however, going for every other artist working on their versions? Certainly Mike Bidlo, Richard Pettibone and Elaine Sturtevant have been engaged in versions of this act for a long time, but I am imagining something with overwhelming reach. What if each of those millions of alternates itself had its thousands of additional versions representing its changing physical condition across the span of centuries? This is not far from Jorge Luis Borges's vision in the well-known short story *Library of Babel* where "every copy is unique, irreplaceable, but (since the Library is total) there are always several hundred thousand imperfect facsimiles: works which differ only in a letter or a comma". Borges' story owed its central idea to anarchist ringleader Louis-August Blanqui's *Eternity by the Stars: an astronomical hypothesis*, which he wrote in prison in 1871 towards the end of a life of continuous revolutionary activism.

"Any celestial body, whatever it is, exists in infinite numbers in time and space, not only under one of its aspects, but such that it appears at every second of its life span, from its birth till its death. Every being great or small, live or inert, that is spread over its surface, shares the privilege of this immortality...Yet there is one shortcoming: there is no progress. Alas! No, these are vulgar reissues, repetitions. So too are the copies of past worlds, so too are those of future worlds...Let us not forget that everything we could have been on this earth, we are it somewhere else".

Walter Benjamin read despair in this speculation on account of Blanqui's failure to effect radical political change through insurrection. He also recognised here an antinomy of progress which through the reign of commodities promotes middle class economic prosperity as a sign of

advancement while creating a deprived proletarian class for whom that economic indicator only becomes a further incentive to revolution. The world of copies comprised industrially produced commodities distributed through advertising, arcades and department stores whose hegemonic infiltration of Parisian society would increasingly stifle desire for change. For Benjamin, Blanqui's assertion that endless repetition means zero progress is to be taken as an indictment of modernity's conjuring trick of concealing beneath a veneer of commodities what would be genuinely beneficial change. Those commodities stand as the illusory emblem of prosperity achieved through industrialisation and technological change, their newness and glamour disguising the wreckage just below the surface.

I don't know that I'm smart enough to draw a parallel with the hyper-commodification of contemporary art, much as I'd like to. I want instead to propose that Blanqui's infinity of replicas might be a key to countering the rampant speculation on artists and signature artworks that continues quite irrationally through one financial crisis after another. With the expansion of commodity distribution systems—aka galleries, museums and art fairs—you would be reasonable in thinking that the proliferation of artworks is in the realm of copies. At the same time that we are constantly manipulated by the business of art to think that it matters a lot who has made the artwork, that same marketplace occasionally provides the opportunity for indifference. The white noise of Frieze Art Fair, for example, where the status and authorship of thousands of works are levelled by the equality of display systems and by the duplication or similarity to one another of the works themselves, makes for extreme dehierarchisation. There is a sense in which you must leave your old criteria of value at the door and start from scratch to evaluate what is there, if you have the stamina. In spite of gallerists' efforts, the replication-virus of the fair structure undermines the likelihood of work being grasped in its singularity. Instead the rule of copies gets underway. A good thing in my view, for replication and multiplicity should destabilise confidence in value and speculation.

I wonder if Foucault's desubjectivising term 'author function' would be any use to us here. In questioning the status allocated to creative subjects, Foucault's 'author function' suggests working positions become available for writers, artists, their fans and their critics to create discourses in which, rather than becoming more visible as unique subjects, they increasingly

disappear. As he puts it at the very end of the 1969 lecture "What Is an Author?", this shift in perspective enables useful questions to be asked: "What are the modes of existence of this discourse? Where has it been used, how can it circulate, and who can appropriate it for himself? [herself?...] Behind all these questions, we would hear hardly anything but the stirring of an indifference: What difference does it make who is speaking?" (p120, Foucault Reader, Pantheon).

As with Frieze Art Fair and with the 'author function' there is a similar evacuation of criteria of authorship needed in order to put up with the many films that fictionalise the lives of artists, or painters, as is usually the case. And in some of these films we readily find discourses laid open for examination or occupation as the roles played by these actor-artists, and the work they make on film, have significance neither for speculative financial, nor academic, investment. Paintings occur in these films as parodies of typical practice. These sequences are cartoons of art making. In the last century French caricaturists like Grandville and Cham parodied academic and avant-garde milieus. There is clearly something of the awareness of the behaviour of 19th-century commodities about these paintings in Grandville's illustrations that reach out to grab the spectator. But the closest I can find in this sphere to what I'm imagining here is the Dadaist parody cartoon of a dog shitting on the sleeping artist's canvas. These cartoons and films show that for any attempt at art making there are myriad impersonations that offer slight to extreme variations on the model. Since infinite variations of any artwork are imaginable, if not currently existent, it seems to me this offers different premises for exhibiting art. A show, for example, of work associated by its close similarities regardless of origin and motive (Art Rite cartoon and Krebber painting), or a show of work made for film, with or without any standard art examples alongside.

When actual historical artists are depicted in serious cinema the emphasis tends to be on conceptualisation, on thought. Pasolini, Tarkovsky, and Watkins show the painter driven by visions, by historical trauma, by family tragedy, but seldom working. Pasolini in *The Decameron*, 1970, casts himself as a follower of Giotto as he wakes to a hallucination of the Virgin Mary presiding over the entrance to Hell. However, in other films about artists we are introduced to the figure of the clown where it's the dysfunctional use of tools that marks artists as humorous and unstable characters. The misuse

of tools offers opportunity for physical comedy but also becomes the demonstrable point of a different worldliness, a counter-productivity. In *Ronald Neame's The Horse's Mouth*, 1958, (best known for Alec Guinness in the role of painter Gulley Jimson) and Tony Hancock's *The Rebel*, 1961, Paul Cox's *Man of Flowers*, 1983, Martin Scorsese's *Life Lessons*, 1989, Joel and Ethan Coens' *The Big Lebowski*, 1998, the actor-artists are conspicuously shown using brush, spray can, rope, feet, even a bicycle, to display a ludicrous physicality to art making. But what if these scenes were read not as dismissible farce but as the fractured double of actual studio practices, and as such doubles no less thorough an unveiling of masculinist tropes than what is achieved by the 'real' art mentioned at the start? This talk proposes that these cinematic representations be taken as implausible models for studio tool use, as a selection of an infinite number of instances that could be used to distort and unsettle the boundaries of acceptable practice.

The action paintings made by Hancock in *The Rebel*, by the painter in *Man of Flowers* and by Julianne Moore in *The Big Lebowski* are farcical, even embarrassing to watch and dismissible as ridiculous parodies of contemporary practice. They also show the artists' absurd use of tools, for this adds to the slapstick and allows artwork and artist to be immediately designated by the misuse of equipment, rather than some less transparent set of signifiers. I realise there are obvious precedents for the painting treatments in each film and that those original iterations exact an important erosion of dominant models, whether through the aristocratic effete-ness and tool and method subversion of Yves Klein and Lucio Fontana, the immediacy of Gutai's material experiments, or, in relation to *The Big Lebowski*, the feminist performances of Shigeko Kubota and Lynda Benglis. In another longer talk these would have to be explained alongside the films as a widening theatre of critical carnivalesque painting. [Show the films...]

Although the way that these artworks are made, the way the tools are used, has a role in the film narratives and in establishing characters, as painting performance events their qualities exceed the needs of the films. Their autonomy as scenes increases with appropriations from contemporary painting practices, to which they attempt to naturalize by accretion some truly odd characteristics. It is these additional characteristics which make the events feel forced to those of us already involved in the flow of art

making, but which I feel offer vectors of optimism or despair, depending on your orientation towards contemporary art practices.

It is a function of the art world's economic model to open up new markets and new types of commodities while holding that otherwise inexhaustible supply to principles of scarcity. At any moment it is a negligible amount of examples that are exhibited as art in comparison to the sphere of existing things. Blanqui quotes from Pascal's statement that "The entire visible world is nothing but an imperceptible stroke of the pen within the wide embrace of nature". And so it is with art, where the great variety of work on show in galleries, museums and fairs is only ever a tiny fraction of what is currently being made; it is an even smaller fraction of what doesn't think itself art but might become so; and it is a negligible fraction of what is still unimaginable future art that lies outside our current physiological or intellectual capabilities of discernment. What has risen to visibility has done so, we believe, by possessing relevancy, timeliness and qualities that other works lack. It is perhaps work that is more interesting to look at, think about, or listen to. Yet even in our world that small amount of visible art is mirrored by so much other work and has so many imitators and forerunners, that it is swept up by its author-function to be part of discourses, as Foucault explains, where the artworks, good and not so good, are ultimately interchangeable. And at that point it becomes more interesting to find the stranger works, the ones with inexplicable aberrations, those lacking author subjects, the ones which are missing out on relevancy and on timeliness, the ones that misbehave, or get misunderstood.

I'm suggesting that we take these film paintings as part of that aberrant world that challenges art-making proscriptions. Their author-functionality is complicated as they are a team production proposed in fiction as the work of one delusional subject. They act intoxicated routines of variously energetic work that typify a field of performance painting close enough to common practice to distortedly mirror the real thing. Their value as warped replicas should bring them closer to the world of actual exhibited art objects which they interpret. Amelia Jones notes the exclusion from commentary on Pollock's studio and painting of his male body and of any domestic context for the work, in spite of references to the methods used. "I continue to get further away from the usual painter's tools", Pollock says, "such as easel, palette, brushes etc. I prefer sticks, trowels, knives and

dripping fluid paint". That these film works are all made in studios that double as domestic spaces where the banality of everyday life intrudes, where telephones get answered, drinks and food are consumed, bicycles and animals are kept, where pyjamas double as work clothes, to some extent renders the male studio permeable to the world of relationships, money and other everyday realities.

Jones points out how critics Harold Rosenberg and Clement Greenberg repressed the body that made the work, Pollock's male, heterosexual, masterful, agile, and violent body, while elaborating on its product, the gestures and actions that became the ostensible work's content. By contrast in the Hancock and Cox films the painter's body is clumsy and flabby, clowning around the canvas. If we can accept that the 'author-function' of the artist Pollock comprises the critical opinions of Rosenberg and Greenberg as well as the enthusiastic endorsements of Alan Kaprow and the kind of critical reprise made by Klein in his Anthropometries paintings, we should add the representations by Hancock, Cox and Coen Brothers, even if they are largely parodic. The clown's role is an anti-authorial one, anonymously played in lavish face-painted disguise, where the comedy parts are interchangeable within the troupe. There is neither writer nor text, just interchangeable roles and routines. That the paintings in the films of Hancock, Cox and the Coens could have been done by any clown further destabilises the prioritisation of the subject painter.

One of Joseph Kosuth's criticisms against painting in his essays from the late 70s/early 80s concerned its formal and procedural stasis and its narcissistic reflexivity. Painting was morphologically repetitive, too willing to concede political engagement and criticality to an easily interpreted visual delectation. Within that safe enclave painting was unable to locate an external position from where it might be alarmed at its vacuity and market complicity. At around the same time, Mary Kelly's essay "Re-viewing Modernist Criticism" instructed artists to better understand the market conditions whereby they complied with the directive for "signature gestures", as she put it, by which subjectivity enhanced art's commodity value. With better understanding of these processes, Kelly wrote, artists might succeed in developing alternative art practices.

I discern a sustained morphological similarity to Kosuth's conceptual practice that amounts to a signature style and through the authoritative

positions and strong articulation of both artists it's possible to claim that a prominent subjectivity exerts its branding effect across their work. Differently perhaps, but no less effectively than with the painting they criticise. From the early 80s another celebrated criticism of painting's status quo suggested that instead of exiting the discipline, subterfuge within painting was the only viable strategy. In 'Last Exit: Painting' Tom Lawson's claim that "The appropriation of painting as a subversive method allows one to place critical aesthetic activity at the center of the marketplace, where it can cause the most trouble" seems hopelessly problematic, not least for allowing the writer and friends to continue showing their work in prominent galleries with critical immunity. The self-assertive actions of these artist critics in using positions of authority to cordon off from relevance large areas of practice is business as usual for experts and as such has negligible impact on deflecting the manner and velocity of art commerce.

The possibility of finding artwork that is unrecuperable by market or criticality (the same thing in many cases) seems slim until one looks at practices that are beneath visibility, that have no interest in being recognised by the art profession, and which are inherently worthless according to the terms of that profession. Would exhibiting such works, even granting them the scrutiny they get in a talk like this, just draw them into the same vortex of commerce that envelops the "outsider" art of Massimiliano Gioni's Biennale and other cabinet of curiosity shows of this last year? Or perhaps that is not where they are best put to use, that their current status as outside, unworthy, false representations is what is of value. Perhaps the criteria that determine their value, or lack of it, need better articulation. An aesthetics of distaste and ruin perhaps. Do they appall us because they recuperate, make fun of rebellion, and present our own serious efforts as quite possibly embarrassingly shambolic, our own cutting edge social practices, institutional critique, even critique itself as possibly, as quite likely, ridiculous?

In case the negative function of this anti-art movie paintings seems completely implausible I want to mention an earlier fantasy that makes this nightmare of cinema art more interesting. Amongst the labyrinthine narratives of Superman comics is author Otto Binder's concept of Bizarro Superman. Initiated by evil mastermind Lex Luthor to generate an equally powerful opponent to Superman, the Bizarro genetics project goes wrong and what emerges is a confused double of Superman whose goals, values

and language he mirrors in inverse form. Justifying why he is selected to solve a crime the mayor compliments Bizarro by explaining it is "Because you are stupider than the entire Bizarro police force put together". In their broken language Bizarro citizens acclaim "Us do opposite of all Earthly things! Us hate beauty! Us love ugliness! Is big crime to make anything perfect on Bizarro World!"

These fake art films, I suggest, can be viewed as a Bizarro world of art, a flawed mirror image, in which follies are played out imperfectly, like warped variants of real art life. Bizarro returns us to Blanqui's duplicate planets As he explains: "Progress here is only for our nephews...Children of a better humanity, they have already scoffed at us and mocked us on dead earths, passing there before us. From living earths from which we have disappeared they continue to condemn us; and on earths to be born, they will forever pursue us with their contempt".

The aesthetic radicalisms that burst out at regular intervals to attempt to disrupt the process of commercial exchange always fall back into the dismal history of this relationship of power, money and art. These radicalisms are in many ways simply parts of a mosaic comprising a complex socio-economic image that requires inventiveness and authenticity (as if these were brands) to vindicate its projection of purpose. Rebellion is part of the code that constitutes this economic-aesthetic relationship. Blanqui's terrifying vision encompasses all of these nuances of revolt as already foretold facets of infinite variation and repetition. Nevertheless, we cherish moments of difference amongst these artworks and ideas. Slacker artists play this dismal relationship to the brink. Remember Mike Kelley's remark that had he known how nasty the art world was he'd have chosen another profession. The notion is well taken that all artistic acts take place in front of and part of this phantasmagoria, whether as celebrations of its form, as rebellious opposition where they mirror the form in negative, or as indifferent stupid undergrounds drifting away into irrecuperability.