

jKatie B Funk!
December 9th 2016
Prof. Carmen Winant
Art Theory and Criticism
Final Paper

“Art is like a butterfly fluttering in a meadow. Analysis of art is like a butterfly on a pin. Each has its value, but we must always be aware of the difference, and what is gained or lost.”

– Darby Bannard.

A couple of weeks ago, during an impromptu installation project, a fellow MFA student and I were swapping stories of when we first knew we were artists – my answer, as what commonly occurs, was twofold: it was either preschool, when we assembled two large soda bottles into a tornado maker by filling one three quarters of the way full with water, taped the uncapped tops together at the neck, flipped the whole structure upside down, then spun it at the middle as if trying to stir the fluffiest mashed potatoes until at last, a funnel began to form. Or, perhaps it was kindergarten, when the teacher went around the classroom, spraying a generous dollop of Barbasol shaving cream directly onto the table in front of each student, where we then got to go to town smashing it, smearing it, and utilize it as a means of making. From that time forward, creating and constructing became my very favorite things to do, be it school projects, practice, or play. Later on in high school and the majority of college, art making consisted primarily of fulfilling assignment guidelines until my final senior thesis work at Saint Mary’s College, where I went wild with mixed media and combined image-inlaid ceramics in tandem with

a performance of live human hybrids. In a very PoMo fashion, I titled the series – **magnifique monsters** – dubbed the medium “ceramixed media,” and felt quite John Waters about the whole affair. Then, once graduation day arrived, with much fun and merriment to be had, all the celebration would come to a crashing, tear-drenched halt as my best friend headed home for good the next day. I was immediately spun into the throes of a wickedly depressing identity crisis - I look back at this transition, though excruciating, and view it now as the launching pad that sprung me forward to create work in a whole new way. Fast forward to graduate level art theory, with its vastly complex and fascinating frameworks, I have been introduced to numerous catalysts for *thinking* about my work in a whole new way.

Throughout many of my high school art courses, I liken my work to the framework of modern, and with it, some really bad modern art. Fundamental assignments like self-portraits and landscapes were attempted with genuine effort - I tried to achieve greatness in every piece, thinking I must have been the most original, baddest bitch on the block to actually bust apart mirrored glass, *splat* down paint, and reference my own melancholic “poetry” throughout my work. Thankfully, I finally realized that Evanescence did not good music make, Hot Topic was pretty terrible, and wearing clothes that showcased a plethora of polyester and spikes was trite as fuck. Unlike the key figures of the modern art period before me, I no longer focused on the idea of trying to be a genius with what I naively thought were “original” ideas, and in doing so, my work evolved forward into the realm of the postmodern framework.

Delving into the postmodern idea of “originality” at the start of the semester, I resonated with one of the first investigated readings that explored the idea and physical structure of a grid as the basis for novelty. In an essay titled “The Originality of the Avant Garde: A Postmodern Repetition” Rosalind Krauss explains: “This origin is what the genius of the grid is supposed to manifest to us as viewers: an indisputable zero-ground beyond which there is no further model, or referent, or text. Except that this experience of originariness [sic], felt by generations of artists, critics, and viewers is itself false, a fiction” (Krauss, 53). As soon as the maker can come to understand this ubiquitous myth, the sooner they can make work with the most authentic voice possible. Hell, they could go the grumpy Charles Barthes route and forego giving claim to their authorship altogether – animosity, after all, allows for the viewer to see with a deeper level of bias sliced away. At the end of the day, however, an individual or group of individuals is ultimately responsible as creator.

An example of this murky relationship between animosity and authorship can be akin to and analyzed in my own recently created work – **CHRUMP 2016** – which also fits under the postmodern framework. As an ongoing installation series undoubtedly political in nature, I centered in on the forever-awful Donald Trump, aiming to abstract and undermine him as a presidential candidate and overall good-natured human being by creating humorous, orange-hued objects in hybridized collages that utilized his likeness. The collages themselves were crude and lo-fi, both in content and execution. Once formed, the images were then made into stencils prepped for silkscreen, a printmaking method suited beautifully for producing multiples. Essentially limitless in the scope of

editions that could be made, I was able to utilize this possibility and create over six hundred prints. I then took these prints and used them as the “bricks” to build upon an existing 15’ x 40’ wall. Though I wholeheartedly took ownership as author for the first part of the project, I was interested in an anonymous, collaborative effort with fellow peers to spread CHRUMP outside of the gallery/critique environment. Part two was born with – “**post/snap/run**” – a sister project I would place under both the Postmodern and Post-Colonial framework for its invasive nature. “According to one influential definition, the term ‘post-colonial’ signifies ‘all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day...there is continuity of preoccupations throughout the historical process initiated by European imperial aggression” (D’Alleva, 77). You truly cannot get any more aggressive, invasive, asshole-white-dude than Donald Trump, unless, I suppose, you look at the counter partner and forever-eely Mike Pence. Even if you turned off every legitimate news source and nonsense-soaked social media platform, Trump and his rhetoric found a way to seep into the very core of our culture and collected subconscious. Alas, five other students and I spent the day sneaking around campus and the city, guerrilla-style posting prints, snapping documentation, and leaving the work behind with a swift exit.

This was two days before the election.

As results slithered in that night, and the unfathomable possibility became horrifying reality, I felt genuine guilt and embarrassment having done what I did within my own art, in both the original and sister project. This was entirely uncharted territory for me, as I almost always feel proud of my work, if not at least willing to reexamine and rehash elements that are not having success within a critical environment. It was not as if I suddenly did not like what I did content wise, but I knew that the images themselves were perplexing enough to be read both ways – as in against and/or *for* Trump as president. This was a characteristic I had been most proud of – the lines were blurred and unclear, reflecting well on the entire absurdity as a whole our culture took on during this past year, if not in the many years leading up to it...

(----- CUE THE RECORD SCRATCH -----)

To conclude this critical review of both my work and the frameworks I associate them with the most, I have realized I must end where I had intended to begin. At the start of the academic year, getting a semester-long mentor was not something I realized was a part of the program. To my delight, I was suggested four awesome women, thinkers, and artists, and I decided to take advantage of the one that would be here for only a short

period of time. Sarah Mattes, CCAD's 2016 Artist in Residence, has spent the last four months living on campus and working with students, both graduate and undergraduate, in a multitude of interactions and environments. We met up for our first official meeting in early September at the Roosevelt Coffeehouse, and it took no time at all for us to find a plethora of things to relate to and talk about. I remember being nervous for this meeting, as I would be sharing with Sarah something very personal.

In that weeks upcoming seminar class, each first year candidate would be given a mere four minutes to show examples of their work, and talk about who they are as an artist. I explained to Sarah that this task seemed too daunting, but thought that I might have a grasp around what I wanted to say. This is exactly where the identity framework comes into the ring – in February of 2014, I was diagnosed with manic depression. The beyond chaotic events leading up to this fateful day, and the tenfold chaotic events that followed altered the course of my life in such a profound way that I would never make nor think about art the same way again. The mania took me so dizzyingly high I felt genius, the depression to such a suffocating low I tried to end it all. This was, in fact, the reason I had to differ from CCAD until fall of 2016.

And so I thought the pendulum of my new identity had swung: there is your life in the before realm, and the life you start living the moment after diagnosis. I told Sarah that for the rapid-fire presentation, I had the idea to reveal this personal trait, and how I wanted to explore it throughout my work. I thought this would best serve people to view my work with a different light. She told me that sometimes when people reveal something on the very private and personal side to relate to others, it could have the

reverse effect of shutting people out and push them further away. In an episode focused on “identity” and an always cherished source: “art 21: Art in the 21st Century” – “Too often those who are quickest to assert their identity or loudest in proclaiming it have fastened on a single, supposedly fixed aspect of their nature or background to the detriment of the rest” (Storr, 2001). I had not thought about art making in this way before, and though it could be argued and debated, it suddenly made me feel quite relieved. I also felt relieved after asking her whether or not I should try to stay the course with one medium and subject, or test the waters in multiple mediums as I usually do. Since she does the latter herself, she advised that this is the perfect time to be getting your hands into everything. And so I dove in headfirst this semester– silkscreen, video, sculpture, installation, performance, mixed media, ceramics, drawing, etc., all the while wondering what is it I am trying to do and say? When will I stop drawing Trump’s awful face on a hilarious dildo?

Alas, I have been whopperjawed with realization in this paper alone:
unbeknownst to me, this whole **CHRUMP 2016** was a mega manic-depressive project. Obnoxiously bright color and sheer physical repetition alone, I had a tiny kernel of a silly idea, played with it, and ran a full 1000mph with it. Then he won, and it was as if someone switched the power off and the world ripped out from beneath. The all too familiar grey-blue numbness crept in, and I was at a total standstill of what to do next. Luckily I have come to realize my fellow artists and professors are like little lithium pills

come to life – balance, relief, encouragement, and *stability* (my Uncle’s favorite thing to do at this year’s Thanksgiving was ask me nine million different ways if I was feeling stable without actually stating the damn word) all in human form.

The ideas we discussed all throughout the semester of theory never failed to intrigue me and always had me considering work, both my own and by others, in an entirely different way. I wrestled with postmodern angst, honed in on my feminist badassery, felt like a postcolonial nightmare, and grappled face to face with identity, a framework I will be delving further into next semester. Perhaps we all started this MFA program as voyaging, haphazardly fluttering butterflies. Critiques, mentor meetings, and theoretical frameworks served as the pins. My response to this is, as what commonly occurs, is twofold: I am happiest running wild, spreading excitement via orange paraphernalia. I am saddest when the blue seeps back in, choke-holding my every thought. Either way, when placed beneath a glass of theoretical frameworks and pinned with criticism, look closely – I will be the one twitching.

Works Cited

D'Alleva, Anne. *Methods & Theories of Art History*. London: Laurence King, 2012. Print.

Krauss, Rosalind E. *The Originality of the Avant-garde and Other Modernist Myths*.

Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1986. Print.

Storr, Robert. "EPISODE: "Identity" | Art21." *Art21*. PBS, 28 Sept. 2001. Web. 09 Dec.

2016.