

Art becoming life → {{{ what exists here? }}}← life becoming art

"I try to discover what one needs to do in art by observations from my daily life. I think daily life is excellent and that art introduces us to it and to its excellence the more it begins to be like it"
(Schechner, 55)

Venture out to the vanishing point where art recedes into reality: no “words or things” exist on that horizon, only the visceral stuffs. Reality collapses back onto itself in a mirror image reflecting its own receding into the realm of “art.” Confronting this divide is like tumbling into a vacuum—no language, no images, and the only ‘feeling’ is vertigo. The threat of being pitched to one side or the other is real. At the horizon where art and life blur into a hellish sort of mist, the artist is forced to make some decision about which comes first, the art or the life. There is no *correct* handling of this dilemma, of course; and the realization of that just confuses matters further. It is a question of primacy, then: do our conceptual and aesthetic decisions prescribe the actions we perform as living humans, or does the life we lead predict the decisions made in the workshop or studio? Of course it’s never as absolute as this; then, it’s a battle of intensities. It’s a question of the degree to which we encourage or allow for the slippage of art into life (or vice versa). And then, maybe it’s just a matter of semantics here, but “allow for” and “encourage” suggest a whole other layer of complexity with which to address this relationship.

I have argued (in previous essays) that in order to truly analyze an artistic practice, the focus must remain on the generative dialogue surrounding and the codependent relationship developed between the artist, the object and the viewership. There, it was a matter of assessing the tension between cultivating desire for discourse and cultivating desire for additional objects. (this was discussed in terms of Foucaults

visibilities and *articulabilities*, and that finding the limits of each gave way to something like “truth.”) One process begets the next—not through the objects or discourse themselves directly, but the anxiety produced by the interrelationship. Here, I will propose that it is as crucial to examine the interrelationship between the artist’s life and their formal work. If one is to develop a decent analysis of any artist, one must first understand the balance they’ve formed between their system of ethics (as a social entity) and the work that they create for society. And maybe it was just a matter of semantics, but it really calls for an analysis of their particular *attitude* towards maintaining a balance between aesthetic and ethical values—or more specifically, whether the slippage between art and life is *allowed for* or if it is *encouraged*, and to what degree, and also which direction the flow goes for whatever their intentions (and then also, we must examine their intentions for allowing that slippage). It’s quite a daunting task and is rarely successfully undertaken.

The film *A Woman on the Verge*, by John Cassavetes (starring his wife Gena Rowlands and friend Peter Falk) is in itself an examination of this particular relationship. The beauty of it is that in addition to being seriously modern (for all its navel gazing) it is also a critique of the Cassavetes and Rowlands marriage—and of their on and off screen personalities, independent of each other. I feel it would be disingenuous to lead you to believe that I am only writing about these two for formal reasons. Although I am sincerely convinced that this film, this particular couple, and Rowlands in particular are an ideal model for citing my argument, I should admit that I do have a rather personal affinity for her and have fashioned, at times, my own artist-persona after hers.

In the following section, the Rowlands-Cassavetes' life-work will serve as a model to illustrate the blurring of art and life. I will contrast the intention and affect of their integration of life into art with that of Joseph Beuys and Ray Johnson. I intend to follow this with a theoretical analysis of Rowland's life in its treatment of mimetic and cathartic issues. The natural progression of this line of thought, I predict will be an analysis of Rowland's life in terms of Judith Butler and Laura Mulveys writings on feminism in cinema.

Intentionality & Ethics & Aesthetics :

“There are two ways of speaking about the human condition: there is the process of inspiration--by which all the positive elements of life can be revealed, and there is the process of honest vision--by which the artist bears witness to whatever it is that he has seen. The first process depends on revelation; it can't be brought about by holy wishes. The second one depends on honesty, and it mustn't be clouded over by holy wishes.” (Brook 58)

Artists generate dialogue to lend further meaning to their objects. Dialogue is also productive of other objects, in that discoveries made through language are not always so apparently revealed through direct interactions with raw materials. In much the same way, artists look to the practice of daily living for inspiration in the studio and look to the studio for inspirations in daily life. One forms a way of seeing the world and calls it a system of ethics, or else a sense of aesthetic. Susan Sontag, in her essay *The Aesthetics of Silence*, explains that a sense of ethics is the site on which one builds a consciousness. In this forming of a personalized way of seeing, one is then able to differentiate between significant and insignificant experiences, between right and wrong courses of action, and thereafter they can suss out the moral limits of living and the aesthetic or conceptual perimeters of artistic creation. In forming a consciousness, we develop an idea of what things are worth remembering, what events and ideas are worth

paying attention to and which things remain forever barred to peripheral goings on—the insignificant, out of focus stuffs.

As social beings, our intentions and social patterns are constitutive of personality traits. A sense of humor, social intuition, and moral boundaries direct the decisions we make and form a sense of self. The way we wish to be perceived—although this is flexible—changes of course, as do others’ perceptions of us. The artwork one makes is formed by one’s perception and conceptualization of the things we decide are significant, or relevant enough to be communicated as Art. In discussing the intertwining of life and art with artist friends, most seemed surprised that there would be any presumed distinction between the two. “Life *is* art. Art *is* life. Why do you want to separate the two?” Maybe this speaks volumes about the sort of company I keep. But, I’d like to think that this attitude is prevalent among artists of my generation.

Ray Johnson

A brief biography of Ray Johnson would include the following information: Ray Johnson, was born in 1927 in Detroit, Michigan. He attended Black Mountain College in the late 1940s, where he worked with Merce Cunningham, John Cage, and Josef Albers. He was a performance artist who lived and worked in New York City until later in his life when he retreated to Long Island. His performances worked in conversation with the Happenings of Alan Kaprow (Johnson called his “nothings”). Johnson’s collages, performances and texts largely existed beyond the purview of the main-stream New York exhibition world, although he was in direct conversation with so many of the artists and galleries of which that world was constituted. Not quite an *Outsider Artist*, and not quite *in* the mainstream, Johnson is often described as having followed a Zen-like approach to

his life/practice and was influenced by the writings and works of John Cage throughout his livelihood. His untimely death, by drowning-suicide, is considered by some to be his final performance—though this is a point of contention, for lack of sufficient supporting information. The following quote might follow this short biography:

"I try to discover what one needs to do in art by observations from my daily life. I think daily life is excellent and when art introduces us to it and to its excellence the more it begins to be like it" (Schechner 55)

In an anthropological investigation of the life-work of Ray Johnson, one might be inclined to cite Bourdieu's *Marginalia*, which is a critique of Marcel Mauss' *The Gift*:

"the cult of individual success...masks the need for collective investment in institutions that produce the economic and social conditions for virtue...that cause the civic virtues of disinterestedness and devotion...to be encouraged and rewarded by the group... people (should) have an interest in disinterestedness and generosity, or rather (should be) durably disposed to respect these universally respected forms of respect for the universal." (Bourdieu 240)

As a social being, Johnson's life is impossible to separate into art-like and life-like events and compulsions. It is peculiar and spectacular as a model for developing a truly fluid relationship between studio and practice of everyday life. His sincere vision, execution, and perennial earnestness is perhaps most akin to those folk artists following some other-worldly mandate, submissive to some inner-driving force. It's a sort of all-consuming initiative to make, to discover, to communicate in a particular manner that eludes any tendency to rationalize or second guess. Folk or Outsider Art is also pejoratively called *naïve*, though it couldn't be farther from.

In Johnson's case, this *slippage* of art into life into art is encouraged, if not a critical necessity for the survival of both artist and work. Many of his collages were directly resultant of interactions with other artists, dealers, and strangers; they were conceptually formed of these interactions, aesthetically representative of other work, and on many levels deeply personal in exposing his connection to the outside world. The

New York School of Correspondance (sic) is perhaps the most literal representation of this interplay. While it's tempting to discuss his intentions, and the aesthetics of the letter-writing gesture, it's perhaps more useful to examine how this gesture socialized the artist, altering his perceived public persona, transforming his life into an artwork.

This January, a friend and I ventured up to Napa to conduct a studio visit with Philadelphia cum Bay-area artist Charles Fahlen. Toward the end of this visit, the conversation wound down and turned to Ray Johnson's work for reasons I can't recall at this particular time. Chuck and his wife had accidentally "fallen under Ray's radar," after he'd seen Chuck's sculptures in an exhibition. They'd apparently received and replied to several dozen letters and drawings from him over the course of a few years. He'd also stayed at their house for some great length of time, which they both agreed was not entirely dissimilar to having a small circus visit for a few weeks. Ultimately, the conversation never entered into discussion of art objects, or the aesthetics of the letters as objects. Their interaction with Ray was as a friend and eccentric teacher of sorts. They related to us the impossibility of describing this situation, where the artwork is less of a particular, physical work of art than it is a relationship, some ineffable understanding formed through ongoing interactions. The closest we ever got to discussing the letters-as-objects was when Chuck asked, "so, what do you do with a box of letters from Ray Johnson?" We both agreed, *what* indeed.

Joseph Beuys

Joseph Beuys's abridged biography would state the following:

Born in 1921 in Germany, Joseph Beuys was a Fluxus-movement affiliated performance artist, whose works were heavily influenced by his interest in shamanic practices, German socio-political critique, and his experiences in the Second World War. The fantastical narrative of his history shrouds his life and work in intrigue. Hal Foster wrote in *Art Since 1900...* that Beuys, incorporated “principles of spectacle culture and strategies of cultic visibility into his persona as much as into his work. ” (Foster 482). In his most famous piece *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*, Beuys made his debut into the American contemporary art arena, contrasting US perceptions of the post-war German state with the converse perceptions--opening an international dialogue about his spectacular life, international politics and cultural difference. A further discussion concerning the aestheticization of non-Western ritual would follow, but is unfortunately beyond the scope of this essay.

Here follows further discussion of Beuys the mythic being. In his most familiarly spun self-account, he describes being saved by the Tartars after surviving a plane crash over Crimea. The Tartars wrapped him in animal fat and felt, which were to become the distinctive elements in his later art works. Conceptually and materially, fat and felt were significant. The suspiciously fantastical narrative Beuys weaves recounting his ordeal-turned inspiration is also potent, and is at least as effective in shaping the discourse surrounding his work and forming the mysterious cloak in which it is shrouded as the material elements. In the video *Transformer*, Beuys offers the following account:

"My personal history is only of interest in so far as I have tried to use myself and my life as a tool . Our present state of materialism and all the things we experience as negative, in our present society has to be seen as an historical necessity. ...a crisis point that sets in at every stage in history and which we can observe in the past. I experienced it in the wall. The positive aspect of this is the start of a new life. The whole thing is a therapeutic process...I first realized the part the artist can play in indicating the traumas of a time and initiating a healing process. By that I mean that I saw the relationship between the chaos I had experienced and the process of sculpture. Chaos can have a healing character if it is coupled with the idea of the open movement to channel the laws of chaotic energy into order or form. " (Halpern)

A mighty dose of fabulation, whose intended affect is cathartic rescues both viewer and artist from the reality of a traumatic event. Some memories are intentionally forgotten, as they are too potent or unwieldy to be kept. Others are reimagined, and in this relived, and redefined—the fantastical memory ultimately replaces the recorded, but unmanageable actual recollection. In Beuys' case, the sublimation of the personal trauma into an international dialogue addresses issues of global trauma. Beuys' life becomes a model. The rituals he performs speak not only to his own life experience, but are spectacularly beautiful in their opening communication.... Mystifying territories....alienating people .

His life was further mystified for the sake of adding depth to his work. His life self-consciously supported his work, his work further transformed the perception of his life. The intention here was not to draw distinctions between art and life. Rather, the supporting histories of each were transferable and mutually supportive. It became the conscious construction of a mythic being, replete with historical artifacts. Beuys' devotion to his nationality, and firm belief that “only art is capable of dismantling the repressive effects of a senile social system that continues to totter along the deadline” (Foster, 482) demanded he give his life complete over to the work of art. Here the life cedes into the social demand for this sort of work. And the artwork becomes life-like. The distinction between Beuys and Johnson that I would like to draw is that Beuys was fueled by a political agenda, he functioned within the mainstream art-world and was self-consciously in direct dialogue with contemporary movements. The intention behind this blurring of art and life was larger than the artist, and larger than the art world in which he functioned. While Johnson and other outsider artists were driven by a particular

inner/other mandate, Beuys' life sought to make itself an example to an entire people in need of healing.

John Cassavetes, improvisation :

John Cassavetes, American director, born in 1929 was the son of Greek immigrants living in New York. He is oft-hailed as the father of independent cinema, having written, directed, and largely produced much of the seminal work of his early career (like *Shadows*, *Faces*, and *Husbands*). In 1956, Cassavetes began teaching method acting in New York City, whereupon he discovered the inspiration (and cast) for his first feature length film, *Shadows*. This film is significant for myriad reasons. In terms of Cassavetes directorial development, it's significance is as a bold experiment in combining scripted and improvised acting with a hands-off approach to directing that was to become his signature affect.

"Cassavetes forces the viewer to live through a confusing welter of ungeneralizable perceptual events. He presents knowledge that cannot be disentangled from space and time. Another way of putting this ... is to say that while the visionary/symbolic tradition takes us up into our heads, Cassavetes calls us to the reality of our bodies. His truth is embodied, enacted, performed. Performed truth is different from metaphorical, essential, or subjective truth because it is anchored in the body..." (Carney 15)

Gena Rowlands and Peter Falk related the demands of filming for Cassavetes in several interviews included in the *Cassavetes Criterion Collection Box-set*. When asked for further character definition, or guidance in how to approach defining a particular role to whom they'd been assigned, Cassavetes regularly replied something to the effect that he knew less about that person than they did. "I gave this character to you," he'd say. He was notorious for playing practical jokes on the cast, via other members of the cast, and spiking scenes with mis-directives intended to elicit particular reactions or incite new

relationships between people. Fostering a general air of uncertainty, the anxious anticipation of surprise elements created a situation truer to real life. John Cage and Richard Schechner in dialogue would add:

Cage: "If you have a number of people, then a non-knowledge on the part of each of what the other is going to do would be useful. Even if one of them was full of intentions, if none of them knew what the others intentions were..."

Schechner: "Even though each individual thing may be very structured? The combination would... cage: "tend in a non-intentional, unstructured direction, and would resemble what I referred to as daily life...many, many things happen which can be viewed in purposeless ways." ... I found through...my work with Suzuki, that what we are doing is living, and that we are not moving toward a goal, but are, so to speak, at the goal constantly and changing with it, and that art, if it is going to do anything useful, should open our eyes to this fact..." (Schechner 57)

In the Cassavetes method, the character's identities are relational. Rowlands asks "How do you want me to be? What do you want me to say?" in character, and out of character. His intention in bringing intention in bringing real emotion into the studio was in effort to enliven the drama on screen. And of the intended affect on the audience, biographer Ray Carney says:

"(Cassavetes) wants aesthetic stances to be subjected to moral evaluations. He judges his characters and their bohemian culture. He asks serious questions about the meaning of their lives and the values of their society. there is a moral seriousness to his work and a skepticism about cultural ideology..." (Carney 38)

Life & art are symptoms of each other, desirous of each other's perpetuation and seriously in critique their potential functions. Carney continues,

"Cassavetes forces the viewer to wade through something much closer to dirty, unanalyzed, raw data..." (Carney 17)

It is close to real life. He invites the movie-goer to watch with all the real alertness with which they live their real lives. Some things are seemingly incongruous or ugly or awkward or superfluous. Such is life.

Mrs. Cassavetes, Jeannie, Myrtle, Mabel :

Gena Rowlands is best explained here, solely through filmic analysis. And for the sake of this essay, perhaps it's most crucial to examine her only in terms of her marriage to John Cassavetes.

FACES :

"I'm too old to be lovely. And I haven't got a heart of gold, either." - Jeannie Rapp

Rowlands plays a 28, passing as 21 year old call girl, which requires her to temper her personality to older/younger men, and temper their perceptions of how exactly a woman might behave at either age. She caters her action or inaction to their perceived desires.

There's something really disturbing about how deftly Rowlands is able to switch gears/roles on a dime, as Jeannie Rapp. One moment she is dancing and singing, entertaining two married men with dirty sailor songs and bad jokes. And she's deft in switching between "ideal girl for Richard Forst," (played by John Marley) and "ideal girl for Freddie Draper," (self) as she attempts to lighten the situation, and the impossibility of pleasing them both. It is only when Draper crudely asks "how much do you charge? I'll give you anything," that the impossible situation is entirely deflated. She is required to deal directly with the reality of her life, not as a modifier for any particular man. She is forced to address the issues of social ethics and consider her life as an independent entity. Richard and Jeannie are both outraged. Draper, attempting to deflect the initial blow—but only digging his hole deeper, really—suggests that "all women are whores afterall." The elephant in the room was trotted out, minus epithets and masks, paraded around, destroying the illusion of refuge and bliss that the trio had worked so hard to conjure. The scene ends with both men going home. Rowlands, who was newly pregnant at the time of filming, originally chose this part in *Faces* because it required less movement than Lynn Carlin's (Forst's wife). Her *actual* emotional and physical vulnerability fuel this glowing performance. The emotion she conjures in us falls short of empathy; it's not quite pity, and approximates compassion.

A Woman Under The Influence:

Mabel and Nick Longhetti sit alone after a would-be pleasant spaghetti breakfast (Nick's co-workers pay a surprise visit). There had been a spat, wherein Nick tersely reprimands Mabel for being too aggressively friendly with the guys. She pleads, "tell me what you want me to be, how you want me to be. I can *be* that!" Succinctly, Mabel's neurosis is largely borne out of her inability to be the perfect wife for her tyrannical and frigid husband. Lacking any direction, or indication of how she might behave to please him, she all but self-destructs. Ray Carney describes Mabel's character thusly, "she is an off balance ballerina of intricate choreography, an eccentric entertainer, parodic pantomimist, and comical mistress of ceremonies."

In terms of formal analysis, Rowland's role as Mabel was closer to an embodiment of Cassavetes' directorial persona. She, as Mabel, directed the other characters in the film to enliven the space/situation. She constantly altered her own performance to reflect her sensitivity to their discomfort or natural interpersonal limitations. Assessing each situation's inherent potential, she attempts to suggestively guide others around her through their life and hers. Save for *Shadows*, Cassavetes films were heavily scripted. His directorial style, however, was quite similar to that of Rowlands-as-Mabel. Interactions and tonal qualities of particular scenes were arrived at through forming relational identities between characters. Rowlands recounts, in interview that "he didn't want you to think too much about (the part) he just wanted you to play it." The critical difference here, between the directorships of Cassavetes and Mabel is the conviction of purpose. Mabel begs Nick for character assignation. In the

absence of a definitive role, she finds that her only true purpose, “the only thing (she’s) ever done in (her) life,” is to be a good mother to her children. Cassavetes is the director, the man in charge.

The compassion conjured here is not a reflection to any particular empathy felt for any character specifically. It is also not intended to be delivered via any familiar situational narrative. The formlessness that is the body without organs, the consciousness without a solid belief system, is what we protect ourselves against. Of the anxiety this vacuum form evokes, Carney says:

“In opening oneself to being moved and enlightened by interactions with others, one opens oneself equally to grief and suffering. The unwallled self is a vulnerable self. The unfinished self is continuously in danger of coming apart at the seams. Interactions as open -ended as cassavetes imagines them to be become frighteningly unstable” (Carney 38)

Opening Night:

“I seem to have lost the reality of reality.” –Myrtle Gordon

In Cassavetes’ fourth film, Rowlands plays a stage actress battling issues of aging and changing roles of womanhood. Cassavetes, himself, plays her on-stage husband and off-stage lover. Although both characters are middle-aged, childless, and unmarried, the issues Gordon battles are gender specific. The film centers around Gordon’s inability, or unwillingness, to put-on a character she deems older than she as an actress can get into. She firmly believes that an actress is supposed to play, to the best of her abilities, the role assigned to her, even if that role is modeled someone’s else’s life and values. But, she is troubled by the realization that she is ill-fitted for the part; if the actress doesn’t believe that the method or concept of the role is compatible with her own agenda, her performance suffers. Similarly to Mabel’s absence of assigned identity, Maurice Aarons’ (Cassavetes character) offers Myrtle’s character no definition, no promise of resolution.

Throughout the film, Myrtle is haunted by the ghost of a groupie (killed early on in a car accident), who can be interpreted as the embodiment of Mabel's youth.

In an audio interview, Cassavetes offers this analysis of Myrtle's dilemma:

"The theatre is extremely formal...in the work ethic/idea. You go to a damp backstage thing...and rehearse on the stage...we have got to know that that is a theatrical thing... So when we see that on the screen...we have to recognize that as being theatrical..."

The problem manifested itself in the theory of the play and relating to the audience her dissatisfaction in her inability to put on this character. She communicated her inability to take on an older character to the audience. By appealing to their own lives and their own difficulties. Her being allowed to go on stage stumbling-drunk emphasizes valuation of theatre/art over the wellbeing of the individual actors. "When you take a subject that nobody wants to talk about...and when the milieu is strange and peculiar to most people..." it becomes a very difficult movie/watching experience. Many women were personally affected by the alone-ness of that actress who needs men even though she's an independent working woman. It is also worth noting that the camera never assumes the protagonist's point of view. We are always seeing her and trying to empathize with her and her actions.

In *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger poses a faulty but valid argument:

"Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. this determines not only most relations between men and women, but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object--and most particularly an object of vision: a sight." (Berger 47)

Ignoring the face-value (misogyny) of this loaded statement and appreciating it solely in application to Myrtle/Rowland's identity issues, it's quite aptly put. The beauty of this film is that the on-stage, off-stage lives, of the actors is fully conflated. Exacerbating this confusion gives insight to our own positions as audience members. In watching Myrtle we are indicted for creating a spectacle of her life. In finding

compassion for her scarily real character, we call into question our individual relationship to Rowlands/Cassavetes, our perceptions of their lives and how they reflect our own lived realities. We are also indicted for hiding behind our societal roles in interactions with other people, in much the same way as actors do on a stage; we are challenged to test the boundaries of self-identification through jettisoning our social-crutches, banal banter, and socially prescribed action. Identifying with this conflation offers no therapeutic salve; rather it demands that we make ourselves vulnerable enough to expose our need for one.

"What is at stake now is to understand that of all the integrative roles lifelike art can play... none is so crucial to our survival as the one that serves self-knowledge. Self-knowledge is where you start on the way to becoming "the whole," whether this process takes the form of social action or personal transformation." (Kaprow 217)

mimesis || catharsis

As contemporary practicing artists, we are post-Pop, post-modern, post-post-modern, post-art. In the age of everything *post*, we are relational beings whose work cannot help but reference all of art-history past and still lurking presently, whose lives cannot but reference all those of our heroes and heroines past, whose influence still lives presently. Our ethical sensibilities are formed by carefully keeping our sociological barometers attuned to the ever-changing climate. Our aesthetic sensibilities are constructed by un/consciously absorbing and filtering all cultural matter in the form of sensorial stuffs. The concomitant development of both sensibilities establishes our sense of self, and drives artistic creation. And then what?

"The truly serious attitude is one that regards art as a "means" to something that can perhaps be achieved only by abandoning art; judged more impatiently, art is a false way or a stupidity" (Sontag 8)

In art-like living, and life-like art creation, one must be wary of the temptation to abandon their ethic/aesthetic filter in a blind search for new discoveries. One must also

be wary of falling in love with the spectacle of an artist persona or artwork. Instead, it's a matter of fully investigating and discovering an understanding of the intentionality governing an art practice. Those to which I've formed particular affinity possess the blindly driven impulse to create, characteristic of Ray Johnson (and Folk artists), valuing above all else the formation of revolutionary dialogue and new ways of perceiving reality. I am indebted to Joseph Beuys for offering himself in ritual sacrifice; his fictitious history denies his own lived history. Beuys also illustrates that by supplanting our actual traumas with more socially generous and visionary stories, we can reshape the present selves that are borne out of past remembrances. And Team Cassavetes-Rowlands on-screen and off-screen life illustrates perfectly the frustrations and elations of intimate relationships between artists. In the three aforementioned examples, I have consciously formed separate understandings of the artists' work, their life, and the intention behind commingling the two.

Perhaps it's apparent in my method of discussing the life-arts of Johnson, Beuys, and Cassavetes that my affinity for their practice is largely concerning identity issues. I'm not particularly interested in overtly addressing issues of identity in my sculptural work, however. Although, as a woman and a minority, I feel my conspicuously othered state deserves some address—that at least I should be informed about women and minorities' performed identities and how they are perceived and manipulated. And, although Rowlands provides an at best flawed model of *woman*, her performance of self provides an excellent diving board off which to leap into this discussion.

Notes on gender performance

In *A Woman Under the Influence*, Gena is channeling John, not his personality but his role as director. As artists, we model our artworks and our lives after our art heroes. In our attempt to make sense of the relationship between their works and life and to challenge or react to it, we cannot help but to try on their personalities as well as their aesthetics, and model our own maintenance of the art-life tension after theirs. But how does this factor in to the tender balance between our own art-making process and our own sense of ethics? Is it something we can put on? Is it some part of our personality that can be subdued or disavowed? Is it really just another part of our skill set (like welding or graphically rendering a figure)? Or is it really dangerous if mis-conceived?

In *Opening Night*, the groupie who chases down Myrtle's limo actually *wants to be* her idol. The irony of the situation is that Myrtle, more than anything else, is desirous of her wild abandon and her youth. Though, the groupie could not possibly understand how much Myrtle envies her, or their vastly different life experiences. Most importantly, she can't possibly understand that the on-stage actress is a romanticized version of her idol. All that Myrtle does behind closed doors (mostly being melodramatically drunk) is hidden from the groupie until her return as a ghost. And in Cassavetes first film, *Shadows*, the main protagonist is a light-skinned black woman who passes as white. She is very young and naïve, and likes to fancy the world as a stage. This playfulness unfortunately flops over into her first forays in romance. She's some idea that love and sexuality is something that can be put on and taken off on a lark, as easily as it is performed in the movies. In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler writes:

“(Gender) is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed (rather) it is an identity tenuously constituted in time--an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*. (the illusionary gendered self is) just a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe...(gender identity) is real only to the

extent that it is performed." (Butler 270)

Judith Barry and Sandy Flitterman-Lewis suggest, in *Textual Strategies...* that women artists should not *assume* a gender role as prescribed by the patriarchal society of which they are part. Rather, they should seek to construct new models for performing gender, and create artworks encouraging new dialogue on these issues.

"One strategy of this... transforms the spectator from a passive consumer into an active producer of meaning by engaging the spectator in a process of discovery rather than offering a rigidly-formulated truth." (Barry & Flitterman-Lewis 117)

In Laura Mulvey's seminal work *Visual Pleasure and the Narrative Cinema*, Mulvey critiques the lack of initiative women-in-cinema have in defining their roles, and in performing their identities. Because their identities are prescribed by male writers and directors, the roles they play perpetuate the stagnant image of the woman as she is performed for men.

"Woman, then stands in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning." (Mulvey, 362)

In my studio practice, I do not overtly address issues of ethnic or gender identity. In my life as an artist I do seek to challenge the prescribed roles assigned to me. And in my written work, I find a common ground for discussing both my object making process and my lived experience. In my textual performance, I explore the ever evolving relationship between my aesthetic values and ethical concerns.

"I can be that! I can be anything!" I say, stars in eyes. Certainly, that is the beauty of "being an artist" (*EVERYONE IS AN ARTIST*, Beuys would say). Certainly, that is the

beauty of accepting the freedom that is found in calling oneself an artist, living for one's work, and fashioning objects and ideas that celebrate humanity.

Endnote : Adrian Piper

I am a fan of Guyatri Spivak, and very much enjoy her style of writing, particularly her willfully badly formed arguments. I am also a fan of Adrian Piper and have written about her textual performance, her life as artist-philosopher, and the dialogue generated by the exhibition of art-objects. In recognition of Spivak's tendency to self-quote, and because I cannot conclude this essay without explaining my affinity for Adrian Piper's practice, the following writing is excerpted from an early text of my own:

In Foucault's *What is an Author?* such essential texts posit truths or hypothesis that propagate further relative work. This sort of "generative grammar" indirectly affects its subject by changing the discourse surrounding it. The base concepts addressed in this sort of writing then function as symbols of themselves, referential to but independent of the author—the original supportive text becomes iconic. In *Meta-art*, Piper turns her gaze inward delimiting the functions of self, artist, work, analytic text, and critique. Here, she determines that "the work per se is without a pragmatic value, and this is as it should be...to justify the activity...by reference...to ourselves as conscious and responsible agents. It is not the art but our role as artist that needs analysis." Her performance of artist-as-object depersonalizes the work; the actress is a vehicle for delivery of concepts. Her text functions the same way, establishing a set distance between self and artist; the author is a vehicle.

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