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sept 5

26, 2015

ARTISTS /
DANIEL G. BAIRD
JESSICA CAPONIGRO
ALEXANDRIA EREGBU
DANNY GILES
SOFIA MORENO
MATT MORRIS
AMINA ROSS
ALFREDO SALAZAR-CARO

CONTRIBUTING WRITERS /
GEIR HARALDSETH
DANNY ORENDORFF
CAULEEN SMITH

CURATOR /
SCOTT J HUNTER

*Finocchio is a group exhibition curated by Scott J Hunter
The exhibition was presented at THE FRANKLIN, Chicago IL
September 5th - 26th, 2015*

*Featuring works by Daniel G. Baird, Jessica Caponigro, Alexandria
Eregbu, Danny Giles, Sofia Moreno, Matt Morris, Amina Ross, and
Alfredo Salazar-Caro*

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AN EFFECT OF POWER

MATT MORRIS

"You can see beyond what people want, what they need, and you can choose for yourself... You chose to get ahead. You want this life, those choices are necessary... Don't be ridiculous, Andrea. Everybody wants this; everybody wants to be us."

--Meryl Streep as Miranda Priestly
in the film adaptation of *The Devil Wears Prada*, 2006

Please bear with me when I say that art is an impossibility. I say it standing in an utter non-place, remarking on an approach towards knowability, that is, parsing desire. Within capitalist systems whose politics are weighted in favor of the wealthy and machines of culture that manufacture the subjects who reside inside them, one is further situated within several intersecting 'art worlds.' What brings us to these sites: art fairs, alternative galleries, art schools, collectors' homes? What do we want?

In full acknowledgement of the brutal systemic conditions by which we are produced as operations, I more and more consider the tenuous knowability of what is beyond the thickness of one's desires applied across one's experiences. Whether satisfied or disappointed by the outcomes of one's efforts and engagements with the world, questions arise: How is this the manifestation or result of what I want? Why did I want this to happen? How have I only interacted with projections of my own desires rather than anyone or space outside of myself?

These are not easy questions. They can feel unfair, excite defensiveness, and be dismissed. Asking them does not propose that one controls what transpires nor the feelings generated in response to those events, only to wonder at the possibilities of how one can know the personal stakes that shape the way those experiences matter. The discomfort of these questions worsens when compounded with the contradictions built into one's desires-- how often I find myself wanting several things at once that are apparently at odds with one another. What does it look like for these dissenting desires to be acted upon simultaneously? How are they [subconsciously, usually] hierarchicalized? And how do my actions represent-- as far from obvious a representation though it may be-- a pursuit of what I feel that I want and need?

While reading Leo Bersani recently, I was reminded of an earlier stage of Lacan's theorizations that does not situate the subject within the world, but rather the world within the subject. This would indicate the pernicious apparatuses aforementioned are in fact internalized. This would indicate that one is first of all entangled with oneself, with almost no easy access to knowledge of the figures and structures and worlds beyond the phantasms of one's own longing. An array of "bad objects" has been scattered before the subject by which one orients that sense of self.

An array of bad objects. The art world bears no resemblance to what I thought it was when I decided as a teenager to be an artist. At the time, the art world to which I wanted access was depicted in the music video for the band Sixpence None the Richer's 1999 cover of the 1988 song "There She Goes" by The La's. The song is set in a dreamlike art opening: darkly glamorous, recollective of the 1938 *Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme*, acoustic and diaristic, gossipy and whimsical, on the verge of collapse. Listed thus, this is an alluring delusion that persists, a mirage oft conjured to shield transactions of power; economic assets; art histories constructed in the image of the quickest, steepest returns on investments; the ways in which culturally transcendental experiences intended to reach across class and education are merely a byproduct of other, more hidden pursuits-- to shield ego. The incompatibility of these multiple visions of the function of our field results in the non-place at which I began. My teenage dream is not real, and what is real is tantamount to the madness-inducing room beneath the Pentagon Grant Morrison wrote about in his comic series *Doom Patrol*. The former can't and the latter shouldn't exist.

One could ask how the projections of our desires are ordered in relation to one another. If there is some primary matter from which these art worlds are comprised, who most easily gets the undefined, unknown stuff of our field to organize into the shape of his desires? How is art used to attain what someone wants?

But much of the time many participants in art worlds don't get what they want (although this refusal is the achievement of other sorts of desires, perhaps). So in revision: art manages an impossibility. Where I wanted art to exist doesn't exist, and why did I want somewhere that doesn't exist? In other words, when structures of power defer the attainment of what one wants, art serves as a space of fantasy--not solely an alternative to that disappointment but as a kind of work that might reorient, examine, and form the basis of new desires out of those failures to achieve satisfaction.

Interlude

He whimpered when I pulled away before either of us came. His hands slid from my shoulders to cup my elbows and draw me near again. A musky sweet corn smell floated on his skin, as if he'd eaten Fritos on his break; this smell mixed with the residue of my breath on his lips and neck and. Standing a stride's length apart from him in the pitch dark elevator car, I put both legs back into my jeans and the t-shirt that had been pulled up to my chin but not over was adjusted into place. My clothes smelled of oil paint. He was clearly not on a break when we'd crossed paths. I groped over to the elevator's control panel and pressed for what I thought was the fourth floor.

The lights inside the elevator jumped awake. I looked behind me with my right hand still running down the metal plating around the buttons. Tony looked over at me stunned and visibly aroused. His company-issued jacket lay on the floor beside him, tossed off when we first touched. The rest of his attire blossomed around his trim, creamy pallid body; cheap, crunchy Oxford shirt and khakis peeled back off of him, hanging onto his shoulders and ankles, wreathing his trembling frame in beige flaps of his uniform. Swollen, poofy boxers were pushed low down his hips, pulled across his erection. There his stomach, only lightly smattered with hair, sloped lower, and his hips and the cleft between his small buttocks.

The elevator had started moving up, and he knelt hastily not to dress but only to get his wire rimmed glasses, which he'd secured in a pocket when we found each other in this freight elevator. He would need to get back to work, since he already tasted of having a break. We didn't speak as the doors opened and I stepped out. His mouth hung open, and he shown like a sliver of moon in a security guard's outfit.

The next time I saw Tony was the following day when I tapped my I.D. card at the art school's entrance. I felt his longing expression as soon as the front doors opened. He looked quietly worried, waited until our eyes met, and licked his bottom lip. I still had to abide by the security policies by which I accessed my studio space, but that afternoon, power was, at least, more complicated for having screwed around with he who was contracted to surveil and protect me.

We did more together, and he more regularly stood in the doorway of my studio, flirting with me and making conversation with me and my studio mates. His manner of speaking was still over excited, sentences tripping over those before them in a rush to be saying something fantastic. One night while he was not doing the rounds he was sent to do, I was walking to the bathroom and he asked if he could follow. Particularly because I like men in uniforms (even security for hire uniforms) following me, I shrugged consent. He stepped into the bathroom and I stepped up to a urinal to piss.

"There's something I've been wanting to tell you," he began as a stream of urine started to fill the urinal's basin. "I've never told anyone this before and I feel like I can trust you." He was unbuttoning his collar. "Oh, yeah," I said, smiling and wary, "You can tell me whatever you need to." He didn't speak then, and telling was showing. His shirt fully unbuttoned, he turned away from me then let it slide off his shoulders and gather at the cuffs. Across his milky back, long, angry scars ran in wide curls from just below his neck down beyond the waistband of his boxers. He looked like he'd been mauled by an animal. We'd only so far hooked up in dark rooms on campus, and now that seemed more planned than I'd given him credit. What have I gotten myself into?



Portrait of Edra Soto with *sillage* +
Dan Sullivan with *White Queen*
at Finocchio opening reception
Work by Matt Morris

"I made these with my uncle," he twisted at the waist, still pointing his khaki ass in my direction, and in his turn, the whelps on his back spiraled up his form. His eyes were very shiny. I zipped my pants and stood at the other end of the bathroom. "I was really close to him; we were really close. He loves me" Wanting both to hug him and run, I took a step closer and softened my facial expression. "It's not like I didn't want him to do it. I did. I let him do it. I wanted him to." I nodded slowly as if I understood perfectly. I found some little words to acknowledge his sharing, his spoken and demonstrated personal truth. I made my way toward the exit. "I broke up with my girlfriend yesterday," he spoke quietly.

"You what?"

"Yeah, last night. I really wanted to be able to tell you about these parts of me."

When I left the bathroom, I told a couple of my pals that I was finished for the night and suggested we leave and go over to Waffle House for coffee and a late night snack. I started to avoid Tony. I didn't tell him to leave me alone, just exaggerated my mounting deadlines and how my art was suffering from distractions. I was nineteen and more of a novice in navigating power than I believed I was. My objective was to get inside of the uniform, inside of the boy wearing it, to mess around with the hierarchies of authority, to make an easy mark of him. I'd been learning too well from the system that produced me: it was convenient to keep him nonspecific beyond the dab of lips, brown wavy hair, white skin, and uniform. In the bathroom that night, I'd been shown that I wasn't the first person to territorialize Tony's body, and from the little he said, there were also some pretty charged power dynamics being played out across his person. I'd been raised to be compassionate, and was too struck with the overwhelming consequences to continuing playing with him. Even kindness was an instrument in an entanglement that was not just me and the art institution, but boys and their uncles (and somewhere, their fathers), a kind of violent sex to which I was just being introduced, and the terms of consent and agency that can be explored through those sorts of play.

For a couple of weeks, he seemed so sad. Still stopping by my studio, but I was aloof. He would wait to catch my glance and stare over at me, a fragrant betrayal glowing off of his ashen face.

A couple of weeks after that, we stopped seeing him. Then the entire student body received a memo, saying that a security guard had recently been let go of his position. The reason was unclear, though the subtext made him sound unstable. The letter closed by emphasizing that students should allow all staff to do their jobs properly, and refrain from distracting them from

their work or carrying on with them in any way. "Ha, that's totally about you," one of my friends told me.

An assortment of bad objects. I work in ways that try to allow my contradictory desires to be articulated. This means my approach has to be varied. I set about to try to know what of myself I have cast before me to serve as a space or context (the space between a bad object and a subject who might not be bad, but perhaps worsens through the confessions of this text). To do this asks for an assortment of tactics in approaching knowledge.

Take, as an anecdote, my relationships to *Finocchio*, an exhibition at The Franklin, to Dan Sullivan and Edra Soto who operate the gallery, and to Scott Hunter, who has curated this particular project. One of the objectives of my practice is to occupy positions of intimacy (even if that doesn't mean becoming intimate, exactly) in interwoven relations of power. I have elsewhere written of myself as a courtesan with ulterior motives. To gain that closeness, I have involved these constituent parties in several interrelated encounters that mark and eroticize their persons as not only contextualizing conditions for the show but also as an assortment of (art) objects, bad or no. They have all been patient, open, and adventuresome.

For Dan, I worked with the fashion designer Randall Hill who designed and fabricated a custom white BDSM collar and harness to be worn for a photograph I made and subsequently at the opening reception. Randall used the white diagonal motif of The Franklin's design as a point of departure in his wearables, so that in donning this gear, Dan is overlaid with his building's aesthetics along with an orgy of other associations to S&M, athletic wear, death metal theatricality, comic book super heroes, and gay circuit parties. After Dan wears the collar and harness at the opening, it remains on view in the gallery, absent a wearer. After the exhibition closes, Dan retains the harness as a gift from me, receiving something that it's distinctly possible that he's never wanted.

For Edra, I developed the newest iteration of an ongoing project called *sillage*, for which I shop for a readymade perfume that I associate subjectively to the tenets, qualities, and mission of the host institution. Edra wears the perfume Botrytis by Ginestet for a photograph I've made of her, at the opening reception, and during subsequent gallery hours. The fragrance smells of honey, juicy white wine, candied fruits, white flowers, and an outdoorsy change from summer into fall. Unlike the gifted harness, Edra does not retain the bottle of remaining perfume after *Finocchio* ends. Rather, it returns to my studio to join an archive of scents from the ongoing *sillage* piece.

These works involving Dan and Edra are highly aestheticized, rich with fantasy, and aim to have the organizers of the exhibition directly participating in my art.

The desires I express in them may be complicated and strange, but manageable and undisrupted by internal contradictions. In considering Scott, however, the things that I want do not organize neatly. In fact, the tensions at this particular place in my inquiries have greatly influenced the assortment of forms elsewhere employed.

Early in this exhibition's planning, Scott committed to helping underwrite the costs of production for the art-works being made by all the artists included. While stipends of this kind may be more commonly attached to honorariums in museums and non-profits, or as advances for commercial ventures with assured sales, it's rare to be paid to make and show art at alternative venues like this one. Speaking with other artists included in *Finocchio*, Scott's generosity is wildly appreciated and reflects a growing interest in financial support for the cultural work that artists do. Organizations like W.A.G.E. (Working Artists and the Greater Economy) have, for several years, been rethinking and advocating for sustainable labor relations in the art world. As arts funding has decreased or been privatized, there is a burgeoning conscientiousness around the regular exploitation of artists' efforts. In my case, the very intended tone of decadence in these projects--custom couture bondage gear and an imported eau de toilette perfume--have only been feasible with the infrastructure for funding into which Scott is personally invested.

Emergent in my desires for this work was to gift something to Scott in the ways I am doing with Dan and Edra. But just as strongly, I've wanted to subvert that impulse for reasons that are conceptually in keeping with the moves I am making and others for which I am less proud. Given Scott's funding of my production costs, a gift at this juncture presents itself as an attempt to balance power, to owe him in less immaterial ways for his encouragement of my work. If these maneuvers are meant to mark out the effects of power, I also want to stay critical of my own ego that doesn't want to be seen as indebted, and is afraid of what being cared for will mean for my own behavior later. A gift here would signify even footing and maintain a social masquerade that shows me not having needs. The vigilantly thoughtful stratagem is not to give Scott a gift of any sort.

And if only that was the extent of what I can know about my desires. More than my curator and benefactor, Scott is also an art collector and an out gay man with an impressive collection and inimitable good taste. His sharp intelligence, candor, and openness are rarities, and since he asked me to be in this exhibition, I've wanted to make good on his faith in me, to impress him, and to solidify a relationship that could continue beyond *Finocchio* (just some more desires to thread through this matrix). I've wanted to foster the affinity I feel in our interests in queer life and an art that plumbs psychological depths. A gift might help do that, wouldn't it? And yet, a careerist drive in me recommends that I resist giving Scott a work to belong to the contemporary art pantheon his collection represents, instead waiting for him to select for himself something that he wants to live with, and then for him to buy it.

It's mortifying to write in an attempt to map these desires. These aren't the longings, fantasies, needs, wants we're meant to admit. Doing so breaches that dreamscape art opening that presumes only superficially who we want to be and in what kind of art world we want to live.

In conversation with Scott and the fantastic group of artists with whom I am here showing, we discussed an expanded notion of queer and Otherness, identities that are persistently set apart. These may be funny issues for my questions to take up from that premise, but my thinking is not only of the histories of people who are punished for their desires: How does power work in these art world relationships? When are the effects of those powers punishing? And are even these punitive consequences accounted for within the tensions between the several (many) things I want? I don't know where the [art] world is anymore, and it may reside within me. My fantasy of it, at least.