Kingston University

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THE RHETORIC OF CONTEMPORARY ART:

SOCIAL AND PEDAGOGICAL SCRIPTS

Presented by

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The rhetoric of contemporary art : social and pedagogical scripts
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Please note that this thesis was accompanied by the following books:

The witches of Tepoztlán (and other unpublished operas) / Pablo Helguera
Theatrum anatomicum (and other performance lectures) / Pablo Helguera
The Juvenal players : a play / Pablo Helguera
The Pablo Helguera manual of contemporary art style.

These have not been sent as they cannot be digitised.

1. Introduction:

The Social Scripts of the Artworld

On September 2010, the Director of Programs of the College Art Association (CAA) in New York sent a letter to all the session chairs of the upcoming annual conference of this organization —the one with highest profile and attendance amidst University art programs in the United States. The letter read as follows:

> Dear Session chair,
>
> At a recent CAA conference a session participant assumed the identity of a living scholar and made a presentation in that guise. This impersonation was part of a performance event that was not made known to CAA or to the person whose identity was stolen. This dishonest action in the guise of art was deeply troubling and embarrassing for the victim and for CAA.
>
> I am writing to ask you to verify that the information presented to you by speakers is original, that the participants in your session are who they claim

to be, and that your session is not a performance, unless it has been presented as such in your application to the program committee.[1]

The CAA conference has long served the academic arts community as the vehicle through which most universities can interview and recruit new professors for their programs, promote their publications, and where art historians can deliver their papers and research. At the same time, the presentation format of these conferences has long been criticized as too tedious, as audiences usually sit through hours of listening to academics reading papers on a variety of specialized subjects. The spoken public presentation is central in the field of the visual arts, particularly in the area of adult learning. Public program departments in museums operate based on a set of conventions regarding the way they present lectures or discussions about art involving artists, art historians, and / or theorists. Yet, very little qualitative analysis has been conducted on the effectiveness of these presentations. Often times, public presentations are deemed impenetrable or obscure. What is communicated in writing cannot always be easily grasped when presented on stage.

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[1] CAA conference correspondence, September 16, 2010

Program participants usually have no way of comparing their level of comprehension to others'. A critical evaluation does not typically follow a public presentation and so it is difficult to fully understand what makes a presentation effective or not.[2]

Because of the general exasperation with the shortcomings of the academic presentation, every now and then a presenter or presenters organize panel discussions at academic conferences that try to infuse new energy through experimental or guerrilla tactics. Such was the case of the incident referenced by the letter, which took place at the CAA conference in 2010. The gesture brought to head two parts of the art world that coexist with great difficulty: on the one hand, the rebellious, anti-establishment artistic impulse that characterizes most of the history of the visual arts, and on the other hand the regulatory, order-seeking world of academia, which aims to document, study and analyze these movements but from a detached and, hopefully objective, distance. Such tensions generate situations such as the one prompted by the letter, where the conference representatives find themselves

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[2] I explored the subject at a conference I organized and co-directed, with historian James Elkins at the Museum of Modern Art entitled *Art Speech: a Symposium on Symposia, ,* New York, June 3rd, 2011

in the position to having to ensure to eradicate "non-approved art" from the confines of a conference about art.

The tenor of this tension is precisely what prompts the research presented in this compilation, and which I have characterized as an exploration on the social scores of the artworld—or in other words, the ways in which the performative manifests itself in the formal and informal exchanges around art. In the creative output outlined in four books presented here, I will present research that pertains to what I consider two main strands of the performative relationship between a given society and contemporary art: on the one hand, the particular behaviors and scripts followed by a group of people around the act of experiencing, communicating or exchanging interests about art; and secondly, the way in which art is articulated, communicated and interpreted in academic environments. The two strands can also be described as informal and formal social interaction, or as presented in the title, the social and the pedagogical score.

I will argue that the study of the subject at hand is relevant because of what it reveals about the way art influences our behavior, our thoughts and attitudes. The sociology of the art world is a necessary field of study that can provide insights for new pedagogical and communication approaches, as

well as to develop a criticality around the way in which art is valued, critiqued and discussed in a variety of performative scenarios, and introduce a set of evaluative criteria to assess their effectiveness.

The compilation of works presented as part of this study did not intend to serve as a scientific analysis of the problem. They all belong to the creative writing genre, whether as plays, fiction and creative nonfiction, or appropriated academic formats (e.g. the lecture, the biographical study, etc). However, I will also argue that the works as a whole attempt to point some of the common conflicts and contradictions around how we engage and communicate around contemporary art, and hopefully shed some light on these conflicts and contradictions. The works presented here reference both formal and informal social relationships we create with art, which can also be understood as specialized and non-specialized, or academic and non-academic. I will finally argue that understanding and managing the "social script" of contemporary art is of great importance because it is through the public program where the potential for alternative and critical modes of thinking can be best exploited.

On Public Programs

For the entirety of my professional career, as well as my entire adulthood, I have worked as a public programmer in a visual arts institution. The definition of such individual is ambiguous and highly volatile depending on the time and place where it is used, as are the expectations and responsibilities assigned to it. Nor is it a profession that a young arts or museum professional contemplates as an alternative, as it is seldom visible. Yet it is that very invisibility, and the variability of its purpose, that makes the area of public programs of such great interest in the institutional environment. As an artist working in that area, I quickly became aware of the way in which the successful intersection of conversation, time, experience and learning are basically creative endeavors that demand a thorough understanding of individual's interests and motivations. It is perhaps the constant exercise of these skills that led me early on to pay close attention to social dynamics in the museum environment, and by extension, in the art world. Over the last two decades these observations have resulted in a number of creative works that nonetheless try to point at social and communication processes through which we construct the value of art. The current work attempts to summarize some of these observations, with the

belief that they would be useful in the long run toward the furthering of the

public program as a key vehicle of experience (be it as an art work or as a

primarily educational/knowledge generative event).

Sociology of Art vs. Sociology of the Artworld

The subjects discussed here would theoretically fall within a field known as

the sociology of art. This field concerns itself mainly with the social

conditions that inform art making, as well as the way in which a social

environment conditions our way of thinking about that kind of art and allows

a group of people to feel part of a community[3]. The issues that concern me

here pertain less to the way in which larger historical or social events

influence the act of art making or the general mindset around a certain kind

of art. Instead I will focus instead on the anthropological, micro-dynamics of

today's artworld— the kind of behavior and thinking that has emerged in the

globalized and exclusivist art scene of today— with the hopes that this

particular focus may bring insights around its specific social workings.

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[3] The notion of artistic taste as a form by which a particular, educated class identifies and groups itself by means of exclusion is articulated by Pierre Bourdieu in his work *Artistic Taste and Cultural Capital*, _____

In 1964, Arthur Danto best described the conditions under which an art work would ideally be understood: "an atmosphere of artistic theory, a history of art: an artworld.[4]" This social environment of those at various levels of initiation and investment in art becomes relevant because of its role as clearinghouse of taste and influence for the mainstream, both through formal (pedagogical, academic) and informal (fashion, commerce) channels. Contemporary art is dependent of the atmosphere that Danto describes to be validated and supported intellectually and commercially through these channels.

These systems of support necessarily need to have a certain stability in order to properly perform their role as mechanisms of support to artmaking. The necessity to maintain durable and stable systems of support, however, often enters in conflict with the yearning of freedom and experimentation that is common of all contemporary art. This tension is not new: modern art was born out of the rebellion of the *refusé* artists from the standards and program of the academia. The story of XXth century art, by an far, is the story of what Mexican poet Octavio Paz once described as the "tradition of rupture"

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[4] Arthur Danto, "The Artworld", 1964, p. 477

—the notion that the new generation of artists would inevitably challenge the status quo created by the previous generation, and through that very challenge, ironically uphold a tradition of rejecting the immediate past while acknowledging its influence to their present.

In contemporary art, as I will try to exemplify in the following section, the notion of alternativity, and its accompanying and corrective aspect of criticality, has diluted even further in the mainstream, yet it is important for us to believe that this alternativity/criticality still is possible in the artworld. This means that the course of art making over the years has come close to resemble the fashion system in that seasonal novelty marks the direction of the debates and markets of the artworld. For this to take effect, it is important to create a system that includes an "underground" type of art making (usually by younger artists) that is seen as alternative. This alternativity is quickly absorbed by the system and brought into the mainstream, after which a new alternativity comes to replace it.

To further explain this process I will proceed to discuss the complexities around the notion of alternativity, its links to the visual arts through the construct of the "alternative space", and how the performative, public

program or live event allows to evidence, problematize and reflect critically

upon the implicit social and pedagogical scripts of the art world.

2. *Alternative Time and Instant Audience*

(The Public Program as an Alternative Space)

In this section I will frame the notion of public program as alternative space, that is, a space of criticality that allows for the social scripts of the artworld to be identified and debated. For this purpose I need to discuss the traditional usage of the world "alternative" in contemporary art today.

Spaces hold objects; they also facilitate experiences. However, physical location is only one of the factors that play a role in the production an experience. Experience —whether it is an art-related experience or not— emerges in the conjunction of a location, an event —a temporal space— and a social context, or social space. The perhaps intuitive, and appropriate, rationale for the creation of the alternative space model in the 1960s or 70s was that it was necessary to have a physical location from where to present and support emerging and alternative art practices, and the same may be true today. Nonetheless, as art and the art world have evolved and as alternative art spaces struggle to redefine their identity, too much emphasis has been given to location and too little to other key components that constitute their

character. The clue to that redefinition may not in the reinvention of their physical space, but in paying attention to those other two spaces that facilitate art spaces: temporal and social context, or in other words, events and audiences. In its updated configuration it is increasingly clear that if there were any component of the alternative space that could be disposed of it would precisely be its physical location, but not the social or temporal context in which it roots itself. (The same is true, in fact, of more traditional spaces: The reason why a vernissage is so central to an exhibition is because spaces have become event-centered, points of encounter where a particular community interacts.)

There appears to be an inherent contradiction in the original concept of an alternative space: while at the same time promoting the idea of an experimental, ever-evolving type of art making, their grounding in physical locations is about permanence, and more about continuity or longevity than about change. Furthermore, as much as a physical space can be an asset, it can also be a liability. For most alternative spaces, financial survival is a constant threat to their programming independence; real state, maintenance and overhead costs can become a deciding factor on their existence and can limit its flexibility. This apparent contradiction is so perhaps because over

the years we have become too used to think of the notion of alternative space as alternative location, instead of what I believe was the original impulse of creating *a* location where to show and think about art.

Back in the 70s and early 80s, alternative spaces in New York were created by groups of artists to support experimental practices that at the time did not have a home. This was long before artists, curators and dealers had to worry too much about real state, but also before a number of events that transformed the art world, including the global explosion of art fairs and biennials, the increasing youth of artists exhibiting at major museums, the emergence of an art market thirsty for innovation, and the aggressive and experimental nature of commercial but status-seeking galleries. Today, partially as a result of the impact of those events, a regular viewer would be hard-pressed today to see the difference between an exhibition or the artists showing at an alternative space and one at the New Museum or a for-profit cutting edge exhibition space in the city. Ironically, galleries, kunsthalles and contemporary art museums find themselves in a race to become more alternative, constantly finding ways to emulate the sound and smells of alternativity; they usually have better funding and attract talented individuals who can help facilitate the institutionalization of alternativity. Alternative art

spaces are generally not for profit and lack with vast resources, and if

anything, in a city like New York, they appear to struggle in competing with

less resources at games for which others are better equipped.

So are alternative spaces today truly 'alternative'? Contrary to what its name

may imply, an alternative space today rarely offers a real 'alternative' to the

kind of art that is shown elsewhere. Instead, they are inextricably connected

to the critical and economic fabric of the art world. By retaining their

original name, alternative spaces today create a semblance of mini-

subcultures that actually function closer to clearinghouses of emerging

artistic talent, providing room to experiment in the early stages of their

careers, rather than representing counter-cultural or underground

movements. The phenomenon is not circumscribed to New York:

alternative spaces all over the world generally function in that in-between

place of experimenting at the fringes, but always in dialogue with the art

world at large. But while this is a valid function, we should ask if that is

enough to claim a role as a true conceptual and practical counterpoint in the

art system. I will argue that this is not the case.

When we ask about the refunctioning of the alternative space in order to retain its original purpose of free experimentation and infusion of new blood into the art system, we need to look at the potential of the use of temporality and social space. When Marcel Broodthaers invented his itinerant *Musée d'Art Moderne, Dèpartment des Aigles,* he was creating an alternative space, one that was both nomadic and temporal and which existed only in the time and place where the appropriate conditions allowed it. The project would not have made sense if it had been created to last forever— it would have automatically erased its original critique to the institution.

Temporality is always part of the equation of alternativity. It is not just a space, but the conjunction of a particular place at a particular time, when meaningful moments occur in art making. This is a concept that today has been understood by many artists and curators, and more and more we have observed projects that set themselves temporal limits, with an official date of death, which provides closure and curiously makes these spaces look more like large art projects. In New York, this was the case of Orchard, a temporal gallery in the Lower East Side, and of the X Initiative, a yearlong temporal space. Similarly, many spaces nowadays operate in terms of public programming and less in terms of two-month length exhibitions. Curators

like Hans Ulrich Obrist have now for some time explored the notion of duration-based exhibitions, such as *Il Tempo Del Postino,* presented with Philippe Parreno during art Basel in 2009. Temporal limits provide artists, curators and entrepreneurs with additional benefits, which include the possibility to conceive the art space as a self-contained art project; to explore the potential of aggressive and dynamic programming that could not be sustained in a permanent way, and capturing the imagination and expectation of an audience who would be able to witness the birth, climax, and death of the project. Finally, it is a way to artificially, but effectively, predetermine a historical arch for a project: alternative spaces, like every other organization, movement or social group, often experience periods of gestation, growth, climax and decay until their final dissolution or until they evolve into becoming a different type of organization or structure.

While the public program cannot replace a physical space, the fact that time is the modifier of the space and not the other way around demands for a rethinking on how we produce an art experience for an audience. In cities like Los Angeles and Chicago, event-based spaces have become the natural response to the awareness that, as our world moves faster and faster, alternativity is about instant communities, about the spontaneous encounter

between people. Time is today our real state, and learning how to use it productively is as important, and perhaps even more, than how we use the four walls of a gallery.

If we are to accept then the premise that public programming is the realm where alternativity can grow, it may also be evident that to simply offer public programs does not necessarily reflect in itself an experimental approach. The question to answer would be what sort of experimental qualities should these public programs have in order to make them most interesting or opening new doors of discussion and experiences. This is similar to asking what kind of experimental art becomes successful, which is ultimately impossible to answer in an intelligent way. Nonetheless, based on my observations of many years of programming as educator and as artist, I believe there are commonalities to experimental programming.

Content-based public programs generally fall within two distinctive "genres": Art-centered events such as performances and education-centered events such as discussions, lectures, courses, and workshops. In my experience, the most recently innovative approaches to programming have emerged from an informed conjunction of the two along with non-content

components — such as food, drinks, a party atmosphere — that emphasize the sense of communion.[5] The reason for this has to do with the balance between program function and audience expectations. An education public program has the implicit function of providing a constructive experience by means of a discussion, an instructional dynamic such as the one of a workshop, or by simple exposition (a straight-forward lecture); and as such this is more or less the kind of expectation that those who attend it may have ("entertainment" is usually not the primary expectation amongst people attending a lecture, but "personal advancement", "learning", are more likely to be). An art-based public program, in contrast, rarely offers such a structured delivery of information, growth or learning, but it provides a direct experience that can well result in all these, but that is generally expected to be unmediated and direct.

An audience that attends an education lecture delivered by a poor speaker, or a symposium where the speakers veer off a tangent that has nothing to do with the announced topic, leave frustrated because their expectation of having a particular topic addressed in a new or informative or thoughtful way, were not met.

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[5] I have made mention of this phenomenon in a symposium I organized at the Museum of Modern Art entitled *Transpedagogy: Contemporary Art and the Vehicles of Education,* May 15, 2009.

Experimental public programs function somewhere in between the realm of delivering and upsetting expectations, that is, between challenging and rewarding the viewer or the participant. Borrowing a page from performance art, these programs can engage participants to enter situations with a greater degree for ambiguity, which may include things like role-playing, enacting certain social rituals (like singing in a church, wearing a costume, etc.) and share personal aspects of themselves (this has been often identified as the "carnivalesque" [Bakhtin, 1965]). At the same time, by using pedagogical structures such as the universally understood constructs of "workshop" or "group retreat", participants are given the possibility to frame their experiences within a constructive model that will allow for reflection and discussion in the future.

These experimental public programs cannot, and should not aspire, to be art or education as outcomes, but rather, as their medium. More than a balance between informal and formal education, these type of experimental programming is closer to informal conceptual art and informal education structure with a formal social agenda.

How to achieve that balance is a site-specific question, one that directly

relates to how one understands their own audiences.

For some, to try to ask what is the audience of a new and radical art or idea

would appear to be a contradiction: if the art or idea is radically new, isn't it

true that the audience for it doesn't exist yet? Under this logic, new ideas —

or new types of art— create their own audiences. I would argue that the

truth however, is different. These ideas, and those new types of art, are built

with an implicit audience in them.

In the 1980s movie "Field of Dreams", an Iowa farmer (played by Kevin

Costner) walking down a cornfield suddenly hears the voice of god saying:

"Build it and he will come". He envisions a baseball playing field, and is

strongly compelled to build it.

The phrase (in the variation of "if you build it they will come") has entered

the English language as if it had been an old adage of ancient wisdom and

not of the pen of a Hollywood screenwriter. The implied message of the

phrase is: Building comes first, audiences second. Yet the opposite is true.

We build *because* audiences exist first. We build because we seek to reach

out to others, and those others will come because they initially recognize

themselves in that which we have built. After that initial interaction, spaces start a process of self-identification, ownership, and evolution based on group interests and ideas. They are not static spaces onto which static viewers arrive, but ever evolving, growing or decaying communities that self-build, develop, and eventually dismantle.

Various sociologists have argued — David Berreby most notably[6]— that in most of our actions as humans we are predisposed express a tribal mindset of "us and them", and each statement we make reaches out or against a set of pre-existing social codes that include or exclude sectors of people. The contemporary art practice, of all human endeavors, is most distinctively about exclusion, not about inclusion, because the structure of social interactions within its confines are based on a repertory of cultural codes or 'passwords' that provide certain status and a role within a given conversation. And in a radical, countercultural or alternative practice, these exclusionary passwords are key to preserve in order to maintain a distance with the mainstream.

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[6] David Berreby, *Us and Them: the Science of Identity*, University of Chicago Press, 2008

Theoretically, alternative spaces are open to all kinds of public, but in fact they tend to serve very specific types of audiences. Smaller and more informal spaces have the flexibility to be more direct about their constituency and generally it could be said that they operate within two registers: one it being its immediate circle of participants and supporters and the second being the critical art world art large toward which they usually look for validation. Larger alternative art spaces, because usually are non-profit organizations, are officially open to all, but they instead serve a niche market within the art world: up-and-coming art professionals, individuals who are somewhat informed and interested in contemporary art, and with lesser emphasis more established artists and curators. Random visitors can walk into a space, but their presence or visitation is not crucial to the survival of the organization —it merely counts as foot traffic. What is key is the sustained supporter who may become a member or help raise the reputation of the space in the social fabric of the art world. In some cases, like Art in General, spaces have sought to diversify their audience base more aggressively, by creating more neighborhood-oriented events and focusing on the ethnic groups that live next to the space. In some cases, even successfully, visual artists are commissioned residency projects to work with these audiences. While these initiatives are valid and often result in

interesting art projects, they run the risk of limiting the support they can

provide to an artist by prescribing set parameters of audiences and spaces

and by trying to fulfill quotas previously set by grant-making bureaucracies.[7]

Spaces in this situation often find themselves between a rock and a hard

place, trying to sell a very hermetic product —very self-referential, cutting

edge art— to people at a working class neighborhood with very different

interests and concerns.

All this is to say that alternativity, when it comes to audiences, is an

unhelpful adjective. Audiences are never "others"— they are always very

concrete selves. In other words,

It is impossible to create an alternative experience and take steps to making

it public without also making some type of assumption about what kinds of

people will eventually partake in them. Do they read Artforum? Do they

watch CNN? Are they English-speakers? Do they live in Idaho? Did they

vote for Obama? When we organize and promote an exhibition or create a

public program, we are already making decisions regarding its hypothetical

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[7] An example of this kind of program was the Lower Manhattan Tenement Museum, a history museum which for several years offered an artist-in-residence program. Professional visual artists would be encouraged to apply to create an outdoor window installation at the museum façade. At the same time, artists had, as part of the project, to engage 10 ESL adult students as collaborators in the making of the work. The double expectation that the work would have to be museum-quality but that it would also need to actively incorporate the participation of non-art professionals for its creation would present a contradiction that rarely was ever solved in the final presentation of the works.

audience or audiences, even if it is an intuitive way. Sociolinguist Allan Bell coined the term "audience design" in 1984, referring to the ways in which the media addresses different types of audiences through "style shifts" in speech. Since that time the discipline of sociolinguistics has defined structures by which we can recognize the patterns in which speakers engage with audiences in multiple social and linguistic environments through register and social dialect variations. This is to say that if an arts organization is to be thought of as a "speaker", it is possible to conceive it operating —through its programs and activities— in multiple social registers that may or may not include an art "intelligentsia", a more immediate contemporary art audience with their inner codes and references, and the larger public.

Most curators and artists, when I have articulated this view in one way or another, have expressed weariness on the notion of a pre-conceived audience. To them, it sounds too restrictive and prone to mistakes. It is true that to pre-establish a demographic and a social group is to oversimplify their individuality and its many idiosyncrasies. At the same time, I usually turn the question the other way around— is it possible to *not* conceive an audience, to create an experience that is intended to be public without the

slightest bias toward a particular kind of interlocutor, be it a rice farmer in Laos or a professor of philosophy at Columbia? The debate may boil down to the art practice itself, and to the commonplace statement of many artists who claim that they don't have a viewer in mind while making their work, in other words that they only produce to "themselves". What is usually not questioned, however, is how our very notion of "ourselves" has come about. Our self is the construct of a vast collectivity of people who have influenced our thoughts and our values, and to speak "to ourselves" is already more than a solipsistic exercise, but rather a silent way of speaking to the portion of civilization that is summarized in our brain. It is true that no audience construct is absolute— they all are, in fact, fictional groupings that we make based on biased assumptions. Nonetheless, they are what we have to go by, and experience in a variety of fields has proven that as inexact as they may be they are more productive ways of working than by blind or obstinate acting on ultimately subjective presuppositions.

The problem doesn't lie on whether to reach for large or selective audiences but in understanding for ourselves our own definitions of those groups that we wish to speak to, and attempt to make conscious steps to reach out to them in a constructive and more methodical way. In this regard, an

alternative space that attempts to find alternative audiences doesn't benefit

by trying experimental methods— it could be better served by traditional

marketing. And this would not be possible unless one is clear with oneself

about articulating the audience toward whom one is speaking.

The conjunction of temporality, community and space, and its creative

combinations, are, of course, not enough. The larger question that lies within

the foundation of most alternative spaces nowadays is the *why* of their

making, their *raison d'etre*. Ultimately, what makes an organization, a

group, or even a single artist become consequential and contribute to the

greater cultural dialogue is not its structural effectiveness but the resonance

of its artistic or philosophical message.

If the primary motivation for an experimental practice is status-seeking, the

transparency of such search becomes quite evident. What makes these ·

spaces alive is the vibrancy of the ideas, the idealism of its founders, and the

underlying political, cultural or social cause toward they fight through

concrete actions — be it exhibitions, happenings, programs, marketing or

political campaigns. This underlying motivation is what fuels the innovation

of formats. And it, again, brings us back to the notion of temporality, or rather, timeliness. The public program and the instant community as alternatives to the alternative space offer the advantage that within their brief lives they can embrace their *raison d'etre* more emphatically; like performance art, they are not rooted in permanence. Spaces on the other hand, have to evolve; many of them can't and some of them devolve and suffer painful deaths. A public program lives a short and happy life, affirming the integrity and individuality of art and ideas, without the need to be multiplied or be given an artificial, extended, afterlife.

Summary

I have tried to argue in this section that the live event or public program constitutes a central component in the artworld's search for alternativity and criticality. It also functions as an audience-generating mechanism, where participants of similar interests form groups and together build their collective identity. I will now proceed to discuss how these live interactions actually tend to follow a fairly established protocol, whether they are of academic or non-academic nature —I will call them scripts— and how they present logical contradictions or gaps when set against the lens of contemporary art practice.

3. The Scripts

In the philosophy of culture, there are a number of thinkers (Erving Goffman, Clifford Geertz) who employ dramaturgical metaphors or parameters to understanding behavior. Within this tradition, and more recently, philosopher David Velleman has argued in his works that the way we interact with each other in society resembles the actions of improvisational actors[8]. Moreover, he has argued that the construction of the self is a process that involves both fiction and truth: "we invent ourselves [...] but we really are the characters whom we invent."[9] This is to mean that the roles that we assume in a particular social environment are not readily assigned to us, but that we willingly adopt them, and in the process of making them our own, which is a process for search of authenticity, we may fall or be influenced in fictionalizing our true character and in the process of doing so we become an authentic version of that fictional character we have attempted to construct.

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[8] David Velleman, *How we Get Along*, Cambridge U. Press, 2009
[9] David Velleman, *The Self as Narrator*, from Autonomy and the Challenges to Liberalism, edited by John Philip Christman and Joel Anderson, Cambridge Univ. Press, 2005, p. 58

The reason why this perspective is particularly useful while examining the social dimension of the artworld is because the social environment of contemporary art exists in constant tension between its need for self-regulation and its historical character of "tradition of rupture" as I have previously described. In the long-term, the binomial relationship of the establishment (market and academia) and the laboratory (freewheeling creativity, experimentation and rebellion of artmaking) function rather as a well-oiled machine that quickly turns counterculture into mainstream culture and as such generates new impetus for new countercultural works. However, in a daily and more routinely reality, the establishment and the laboratory coexist in awkward fashions, such as when a museum trustee interacts with a radical young artist, or like, as the example I showed before, an academic conference on art has to ask presenters to eradicate any artistic aspirations from their presentations. Following I will outline what I perceive the main characteristics of the informal (non-academic) and the formal (academic) social script of the visual arts.

The Non-Academic Script

By and far, the greatest amount of communication that we have about art occurs in an informal capacity, simply because any formal education and formats of exchange occupy a small portion of our lifetime. Even in academic environments where art professionals are dedicated to the study of art, a substantial extent of the communication and discussion around art largely occurs outside of the classroom or the lecture hall and more in social events, gatherings, café discussions, and one-to-one conversations. In the artworld, social gatherings are absolutely central to establish consensus about a particular art or artist, exchange information, conduct financial transactions and position oneself favorably in the social network of art. The kind of professional networking that takes place in this instances is likely not different from other disciplines. The more complex aspect of the social script in the artworld is the way in which these exchanges influence taste, desirability and consensus around the value of a particular artwork, artist, or groups of these. Events such as vernissages of art fairs and biennials become highly influential in pointing the direction of a variety of trends in the market and amidst high-level curatorial circles.

For those professionally involved in the artworld, access to its inner circles is dependent on socializing and performing successfully in them. This entails for an "actor" to agree to conform to a particular social role in her respective

capacity (whether as artist, curator, etc). These pre-established roles, and the specific demands on them, appear to be remarkably consistent throughout the world.[10] Some of its characteristics could be outlined as follows:

1. The consistency of behavior and social regulations in the established social environments of the artworld is not usually something explicitly acknowledged or recognized, and it is not taught formally but rather learnt informally through regular interaction within the art scene. While studio art programs start to offer professional skill development to introduce artists to the rudiments of promoting and selling their work, very little attention is given to how an artist should perform in specific professional scenarios and how to read and understand codes and cues from other professionals.

2. This lack of explicit acknowledgment of the social code within the artworld often results in a great deal of anxiety for young professionals who often fear for being inadequate, appearing naïve or overly eager for attention.

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[10] *The Pablo Helguera Manual of Contemporary Art Style*, one of the books discussed here and originally written in Spanish, has been translated to Hungarian, Croatian, and Korean, arguably because according to the respective editors of each edition the material presented is applicable to the local artworlds of these countries.

3. Professional behavior in the contemporary artworld largely requires restraint and at times even dishonesty (such as speaking favorably about an exhibition that one does not consider in high regard), in order not to endanger professional opportunities.

4. The non-academic script in the artworld, applying Bourdieu's ideas, is indeed a class script based on exclusionary premises: the insider group thrives when a strong *cultivated disposition* is developed that distinguishes it from others.

It is not possible, not the objective here, to provide a history or a extensive description of social behaviors around contemporary art; the specific feature that this study will focuses on is on the tension that is generated when the specific demands of particular social roles and the need of advancement within the non-academic script —in particular, the need to maintain exclusivity —enter in conflict with other, more liberal values usually connected to the art practice.

Using Goffman's ideas of "out of frame" activity as well as Michel de Certeau's ideas of "la perruque" from his work "the practice of Everyday Life", I will argue that the works discussed here try to enact anomalous

situations in real life that help reflect on the contradictions presented by the demand of fulfilling these social scripts.

The Academic Script

By the academic script in the visual arts I will refer here not on the actual written and published scholarship on contemporary art, but the way in which this activity (the activity of research, writing, publishing, etc) influences social and professional behavior.

Academic writing in the visual arts largely follows the same written standards set by other branches of the humanities. One could divide the three primary areas of academic activity around the visual arts as theory of studio art instruction (which is different from the pragmatics of teaching art in the studio), art history, and art theory. These three areas of self-reflexivity of the visual arts are already present by the emergence, toward the Renaissance, of the modern concept of art.[11] In other words, the need to instruct on forms of art making, the chronicle of those forms and tendencies, and the need to theorize about the meaning of these

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[11] See Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: History of the Image before the Era of Art,* University of Chicago Press, 1997

forms can be regarded as a natural extension of the art practice itself. At the same time, however, the articulation into words of the artistic experience has always presented a certain distance for a number of reasons. The most evident of them is the fact that interpreting the visual through words already is an imperfect proposition, as images can't objectively be translated into words. The less evident reason, which has been studied by art historians like James Elkins, is that the demands of the philosophical, historical, or pedagogical discourse on concrete artworks are such that resulting texts become only partial interpretations or representations of those art works, and yet are often assigned a kind of objectivity that is at best partial.[12]

Artists and Academic Writing

As one examines the separation from the praxis of theoretical writing about art is important to recognize that several texts written in the fields of art theory, art history, and pedagogy are written by artists. In the modern era, manifestoes as well as practical and theoretical books laid the ground to the understanding of these movements (for instance

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[12] See James Elkins, *Our Beautiful, Dry, and Distant Texts: Art History as Writing.* Penn State Press, 1997

Albers' *Interaction of Color*, and Kandinsky's *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*). In the post-war era, the texts of artists like Sol Lewitt, Dan Graham, Alan Kaprow, Martha Rosler and Andrea Fraser have articulated the issues faced by their respective generations and at times become statements of purpose for their artistic approaches. However, artist writings are generally regarded as separate, pushed to function as a category on their own, or seen as primary documents meant to shed light more to that artist's work and less to seen in contrast to other scholarship. This is partially due to the fact that artist writings don't usually conform to academic standards of research nor do they usually reference other writings in a methodical fashion.

The distance between theory and praxis in the visual arts is best understood in the textual analysis of art because it is through the written practice that scholarship is taught and developed. Art history and philosophy of art programs seldom include artmaking as a requirement, but more importantly, the performative component of pedagogy receives very little attention. This means that academics, when communicating their (mostly written) ideas to an audience, usually conform to very traditional methods of academic presentation (the 20-page paper, the

slide lecture, etc). Usually reading from notes and using set patterns of monotone intonation, the implicit aim of the verbal delivery is to cancel itself out by virtue of it having purely nondescript qualities.

In order to understand the limitations of the visual arts speech it is useful to first refer to the theory on speech acts of John L. Austin and the work by Donald A. Bligh on lecturing.

According to John L. Austin (*How to do Things with Words,* 1962), speech acts can be analyzed in three levels: locutionary (ostensible meaning) illocutionary (intended meaning) and perlocutionary (actual effect).

With this in mind, and when we study the standardization of the academic visual arts speech one can argue that the locutionary and illocutionary aspect of a visual arts speech is separated from its perlocutionary aspect. Examples of this fact abound, but a public experiment I recently conducted with a class of art educators in Porto Alegre, Brazil was to start my lecture with reading out loud a written

description of *Las Meninas*, by Velazquez[13]. In this short paragraph I included a standard grouping of data, quotes, interpretive and objective information around this painting, similar to what one would encounter in an encyclopedia entry. Immediately after reading this paragraph I asked the audience of 300 attendees to repeat, with the closest accuracy possible, what I had just said. Out of that audience not a single participant was able to recall the paragraph word by word; only a handful of listeners were able to approximate close to 75% of what I had said through paraphrasing, and a much larger amount of listeners were able to recall a handful of words and data of what I had said.

The experiment brings me to the work of Donald E. Bligh, *What's the Use of Lectures* (1971). In this work, Bligh argues that the format of the lecture is not more effective, and sometimes less effective, than other modes of communication to persuade or communicate a given set of ideas. Bligh's work is consistent with most of the pedagogical thinking of the XXth century around the importance of the use of dialectics in teaching (Dewey, Freire, etc). Through a number of studies, Bligh shows that the lack of participation and involvement in the audience while

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[13] Inaugural lecture by the author to the participants of the annual course of art educators of the Mercosul Biennial, Porto Alegre, Brazil, May 25th, 2011.

listening to a lecture takes them to a near-dormant state where attention to what is being said decreases.

[add learning graph]

Academic presentations in the visual arts, in conclusion, in virtue of being speech acts as well as acts of pedagogical persuasion, are ineffective in two ways: one, in how its language limits its ability to properly "translate" the art experience into words, and secondly, in how they are ineffective at communicating its original or intended purpose to the audience.

Summary

I have tried to show that social communication in the artworld is comprised of performative utterances that fall within the academic and non-academic categories. These categories largely correspond to the two main systems of support of contemporary art, one being the art market and the other being the theoretical or curatorial field. Basing myself on the critique of Pierre Bourdieu and other sociologists, I have argued that

non-academic interactions in the artworld are largely conformed in a hierarchical way through exclusionary codes that set an elite group (curators, collectors) apart from the uninitiated. In terms of the academic communication around the visual arts, I have referred to the work of J.L. Austin and Donald A. Bligh to argue that there is a significant distance between the illocutionary and perlocutionary aspects of communication, and that the standard formats by which the academic world shares its scholarship (mainly the art lecture) is at best ineffective or equally effective as other means.

In the next section I will address on how the works submitted for consideration constitute an exploration on how to articulate the communication and contradictory gaps of both academic and non-academic scripts and how, building on the argument that I made in section 2 regarding the public program as an alternative space, seek to exploit these gaps in communication to problematize them.

5. *Etiquette: The Manual of Contemporary Art Style*

BACKGROUND AND PRECEDENTS

a. Art

In the history of visual arts, several writers, filmmakers, and artists have addressed the foibles and ironies of collectors, artists and curators. By and far the most studied character in literature is the artist herself, usually through dramatic representations (such as Vicente Minelli's film *Lust for Life* [1956], based on the life of Van Gogh) or novels (Somerset Maugham's *On Human Bondage*, [1915] on which the protagonist briefly tries to make a career as an artist in Paris). These dramatized approaches to art, however, constitute less a critique of the inner workings of the artworld from inside and more a representation of the perennial subjects around the artistic practice, such as the creative struggle and the persona of the artist. For the most part, this vein of critique of the artworld is more an idealized version of it. The exception may be found in the visual woks of certain artists such as Honoré Daumier who on many occasions produced works that caricaturized the art critics of his time.

The rise of institutional critique in the 1960s brought with it a stronger awareness of the inherent power structures of the art world. Marcel Broodthaers' *Musee d'Art Moderne, Department des Aigles*, previously referenced in this text, constitutes an early example of artists appropriating the institutional codes of the museum in order to expose the process by which it validates certain kinds of art or artists. The influence of feminism and identity politics in the 1970s in art led to the rise of a kind of art that would be more explicit in adopting institutional languages such as Broodthaers had done in the 60s[14]. Starting in the 1970s, artists such as Hans Haacke and Michael Asher produced installations that would utilize the same seemingly objective mechanisms of interpretation of museums to display the ways in which private funders, trustees and other individuals influenced the museums' policies[15]. It would not be possible here to outline all the artists who have operated under the category of so-called institutional critique, but I will only highlight two artists who addressed the social and academic dynamics of the artworld.

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[14] A survey of the works by artists who have worked in this vein is the exhibition *The Museum as Muse*, curated by Kynaston McShine at the Museum of Modern Art in 1999.
[15] A comprehensive analysis of this history was made at a symposium I organized at the Guggenheim Museum entitled *The Museum as Medium*, April 2002. (http://pablohelguera.net/2002/04/the-museum-as-medium-2002)

The first one is the Museum of Jurassic Technology, a project by David

Wilson in Los Angeles that continues to this day[16]. The museum, which

does not proclaim itself as an artwork but as a legitimate institution, is

imbued with postmodern irony in that it replicates all the curatorial and

pedagogical trimmings of an art and history museum, presenting

materials in the most professional and impeccable museography, and yet

presenting stories that are profoundly perplexing and suspicious in

authenticity (such as displays about human horns and screaming ants).

The stories of Wilson's museum, which have thoroughly been

commented upon by many writers amongst them Lawrence Weschler, are

usually rooted on certain true, if obscure, scientific facts but are then

stretched to the limits of verisimilitude by using the authoritative,

interpretive voice of the museum label and the audio guide.

The second example is the work of Andrea Fraser, a performance artist

whose work is largely identified with the institutional critique practice. In

1989, Fraser embodied a fictional museum docent adopting the name

Jane Castleton to offer a tour of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Fraser's

tour parodized the condescending and highly formal lecture mode of

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[16] See Lawrence Weschler, *Mr. Wilson's Cabinet of Wonder*, Vintage, 1996

traditional museum tours, while at the same time taking a swipe at institutional collecting politics[17].

b. Etiquette

In Latin America, social etiquette traditionally has been regulated primarily by a single book of reference written in the middle of the XIXth century and to this day still published and disseminated. Manuel Antonio Carreño (1812-1874) was a Venezuelan musician, professor and diplomat who, toward 1853 published an etiquette manual entitled *Manual de Urbanidad y Buenas Maneras para el Uso de la Juventud de Ambos Sexos en el Cual se Encuentran las Principales Reglas de Civilidad y Etiqueta que Deben de Observarse en las Diversas Situaciones Sociales, Precedido de un Breve Tratado Sobre los Deberes Morales del Hombre (Manual of Urbanity and Good Customs for the Use of Youth of both Sexes In Which Included the Main Rules of Civility and Etiquette that must be Observed in the Various Social Situations, Preceded by a Brief Treatise about the Moral Duties of Men)*. Carreño's manual was extremely successful and still today is considered the main

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[17] The transcript of Andrea Fraser's tour as well as other speeches and performance lectures can be found in her book *Museum Highlights: The Writings of Andrea Fraser*, MIT Press, 2007.

reference book for a wide variety of etiquette questions particularly

regarding table manners and conversation. A contemporary reading,

however, of this book shows its extreme distance from contemporary life,

such as the statement "it is not permitted to men to remain inside his

home without wearing a tie or with rolled sleeves[18]", or "only in homes

where we have great familiarity can we take our hat out of our hands and

place it anywhere in the visit room of the house without previous

invitation of the hosts.[19]". In English language, the equivalent of

Carreño's manual is Emily Post (1870-1960) whose book *Etiquette in*

Society, in Business, in Politics from 1922 is still used, in updated

versions, as reference for modern day etiquette.

c. Social Satire and the Appropriated Official Language

In the English language satirical tradition, two writers have been direct

references to *The Manual of Contemporary Art Style*. The first one is

Jonathan Swift (1667-1745) and the second Ambrose Bierce (1842-

1913). Swift's famous text, a *Modest Proposal* (1729) is a model of

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[18] Manuel Antonio Carreño, *Manual de Urbanidad y Buenas Maneras*, New York, Appleton & Co., 1855, p .59
[19] Carreño, ibid, p. 87

usage of perverse logic to condemn social injustice and poverty in Ireland. Another one, less known but also influential book by him and entitled *A Complete Collection of genteel and ingenious Conversation, according to the most polite mode and method now used at Court, and in the best Companies (1738)* functions as a satirical reference book for conversation topics for the upper classes in England. Bierce's *The Devil's Dictionary* (1911, previously published as T*he Cynic's Word Book* in 1906) adopts the format of the reference book to make a social and political critique through highly cynical definitions of basic words and concepts. As example: "Conservative (n.) A statesman who is enamoured of existing evils, as opposed to a liberal, who wishes to replace them with others.[20]" Both Swift and Bierce appropriate a type of official language (the journalistic editorial and the dictionary, respectively) in order to give gravity and authority to their voices, while at the same time stretching the rationality of their comments to provoke the reader into reflection.

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[20] Ambrose Bierce, *The Devil's Dictionary*, Plain Label Books, 1925, p. 50

The Pablo Helguera Manual of Contemporary Art Style was written in Spanish during the summer of 2005 and published that same year by Tumbona Ediciones in Mexico City; the English version was published by Jorge Pinto Books in New York in 2007. Early versions of some of its texts, however, were published as early as 199__ at the Chicago Artist Coalition Newsletter[21]. The book precedes other sociological studies of the artworld, such as Sara Thorntorn's *Seven Days in the Artworld* (2009), and *The 12 Million Stuffed Shark: the Curious Economics of Contemporary Art* by Don Thompson (2008).

The objective of this book was to provide a critical panorama of today's dynamics of the art world, while at the same time offering an indirect insider's look at unspoken and implicit communications of the art scene. The book sought to fill a gap in the sociology of art literature by articulating as clearly as possible a taxonomy of the principal professional players in the artworld as well as the social situations that one encounters when entering it.

Because of the high ambiguity that characterizes social interaction in these spheres, I determined that the best approach to follow was the structure of etiquette manuals, which address every ambiguous situation

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[21] Pablo Helguera, Chicago Artist Coalition Newsletter, ____ Chicago, IL ___

very explicitly and provide unequivocal guidelines around how to proceed in each scenario. The use of Carreño as the primary reference for the tone of this book was ideal given that the 150-year old language of this work is both antiquated, highly formal, and verging on the unintended self-parody. The satirical tone championed by Swift and later further exploited by Bierce became a guideline to maintain cohesiveness and internal logic in the text. The choice in the title and the graphic design of the book was also important, as I deemed necessary to make a direct connection with contemporary reference books, such as is the case of the *Chicago Manual of Style* and Strunk and White's *Elements of Style* (1918). The reference to "style" versus "etiquette" in the title of the book was made in order to emphasize the overall critique of the book that in the contemporary art scene style often replaces substance, and that taste is often influenced by contextual variables that have little to do with the actual value of a given artwork or artist.

It is not possible to do a summary of the book here. However, I will conclude by outlining the manners in which this work draws from the thinking on academic/non-academic scripts outlined previously as well as the notion of alternativity, even though I would like to think that these might be already evident to the reader.

The book follows the tradition of the dramaturgical perspective to culture. In this sociological approach, the interaction between individuals is analyzed as if they all there members of a play and were meant to fulfill a particular role. The book speaks of the reader in an "out of frame" capacity (using Goffman's term), basically speaking to her as a blank slate that needs to learn how to "operate at the highest levels" in the artworld, as stated in the introduction.

In terms of the academic script, the book clearly appropriates the pedagogical tone of etiquette manuals, but enacting within this conformity what Michel de Certeau terms "la perruque"[22]. De Certeau explains that this term, which describes a double activity done by an individual under a prescribed order without stealing from it or altering it (for instance, a worker borrowing a tool from work for a personal task), permeates modern life more and more. When referencing how the American Indians adapted to the Spanish conquest de Certeau writes: "they subverted them from within– not by rejecting them or transforming them {...] but by many different ways of using them in the service of

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[22] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*. University of California Press, 1984, p . 24

rules, customs or convictions foreign to the colonization from which they could not escape.[23]"

At *prima facie*, *The Manual of Contemporary Art Style* acts in conformity with the existing order of the contemporary art scene, functioning as a helpful manual for the uninitiated into the high social circles of art. While meeting this purpose, however, the book also inserts its own "perruque", providing the reader with a critical account on the superficialities and contradictory attitudes that sometimes informs these circles, and attempts to generate awareness in the reader to ultimately reject these sort of behaviors.

In terms of redefining the notion of alternativity discussed in section 2, the *Manual* seeks to problematize and evidence the fact that the artworld, while constantly yearning for the latest and most radical kind of art, and praises itself for displaying a liberal attitude and open mind to experimentation, actually is very conservative and regimented when it comes to social interactions, and any faux pas within the set expectations amidst this circles can quickly translate to falling out of favor in the social echelons of the art scene. As opposed to other works discussed here, the *Manual* does not constitute a performance script, but instead

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[23] de Certeau, Ibid, p.32

articulates an implicit script for daily interactions with the professional

art world.

6. *Art History as Biography: The Witches of Tepoztlán*

An important problem in art history is the interpretation of the artist's biography in connection to her work. As a discipline that gravitates toward narrativity and storytelling, the artist biography becomes a central source of information to the historian and can provide answers to a wide variety of questions regarding the artists' outlook on the world, her connections with other artists, influences, and personal biases. In fact, the discipline of art history is considered to be born with Giorgio Vasari's biographical compendium *Lives of the Artists* (1550).

The practice of biographical criticism in the visual arts developed through the modern era until it was questioned in the 1920s by members of the New Criticism movement who warned against the "biographical fallacy", that is, the tendency to read intentionality and relate biographical anecdotes to the meaning of artworks.[24] Starting in the avant-garde, and even more so in the post-war era with the rise of performance art, a number of artists became interested in blurring the boundaries between their art work and their lives. Marcel Duchamp,

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[24] Donald J. Winslow, *Life Writing: a Glossary of Terms in Biography, Autobiography, and Related Forms* (2 ed) University of Hawaii press, p. 7 (1995)

Salvador Dalí, Andy Warhol and Martin Kippenberger are only a few names of artists who made their biographies nearly indistinguishable from their art work[25]. Some of these impulses would include fabricating biographical data, obscuring some facts while highlighting others, destroy early works and backdating others, etc. Their gestures became a way to claim control of their own artistic narratives of which they were conscious would play a role in the analysis of their work[26].

The works referenced in this section focus on the way in which academic script of art biography negotiates today between the historical legacy of art history as biography and the way in which artists like the ones mentioned before participate in fabricating their own myth or image for history. The argument that I have sought to make with these works is that the academic script of art is a contested territory in which artists pass from being individuals to performers of culture, and that the historian as author of the academic script imposes ownership to the narrative. The various works presented here constitute a range of approaches for the omnipresent historical voice, and the authoritative weight that it carries.

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[25] See Calvin Tompkins, *Marcel Duchamp, A Biography*, Holt Papeback, 1998; Jessica Morgan, *Martin Kippenberger,* Tate, 2006; Andy Warhol, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol,* Mariner Books, 1977; *Salvador Dalí, The Secret Life of Salvador Dalí,* Kessinger Publishing LLC, 2010

[26] There are many examples of artists' consciousness of their own biography. One example is Andy Warhol's Time Capsule project, http://edu.warhol.org/app_aw_tc.html

The Witches of Tepoztlán (and other Unpublished Operas) takes the form

of a musicological study of the lives of four fictional opera composers

and their recently "uncovered" masterpieces. The composers, which

range in eras, musical styles, racial and cultural backgrounds, constitute,

as the critic Cuauhtémoc Medina remarked in an art review of the

exhibition that accompanied this publication: "the game of the

protagonists (...) did something more than exciting curiosity: it presented

a purely Borgian experience modulated by the pleasures and alternate

expectations of multiculturalism.[27]" The book takes the following

approaches:

a. Structurally, the stories of *Las Brujas de Tepoztlán* are built as a

   baroque composition such as a prelude followed by a fugue. A fugue

   is a contrapuntal composition in which several melodies (or

   'subjects') intertwine in response to each other ('countersubjects') and

   constitute a tightly woven fabric that holds together as a whole. Using

   these same principles, each one of the four stories includes the

   narration of the biography of the artist and the narration of the story of

   the opera ('subject' and 'counter-subject', respectively). All eight

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[27] Cuauhtémoc Medina, *Opera y Credulidad*, review in Reforma newspaper, Mexico City, April 11, 2007.

stories are meant to resonate with one another in subject matter, so that toward the end the reader can make her own connections.

b. At a conceptual level, the opportunity of departing from the visual arts genre and instead deal with opera allows for carrying out the dramaturgical approach to culture that has been discussed in previous sections, but this time using music as a metaphor to discuss authorship as a collective enterprise of actors such as the composer, the interpreter (the performer) and the historical interpreter (the critic).

c. In terms of the debate around the role of biography in art and the "biographical fallacy", the story inserts the opera storylines that are in close parallel to the events in the lives of the authors, at some point drawing relationships that make one impossible to understand without the other.

In summary, *The Witches of Tepoztlán* is a study on the pitfalls of biographical criticism and the deterministic agenda that scholars impose on the reading of a particular artist or artwork in order to create their respective academic scripts.

7. *The Theater of Art: Theatrum Anatomicum*

The works gathered in *Theatrum Anatomicum (and other performance lectures),* range from 2003 to 2009. They all, in one degree or another, play off the formality of the lecture or the panel discussion, appropriating the academic language, protocols and gestures utilized in these formats but soon veering off into their own. To discuss it here I will group them in two sections- one as performance lectures and as 'parafictional' panel discussions.

The term 'performance lecture' or 'lecture performance' is loosely utilized and generally referred to as a lecture given by an artist where the academic conventions of lecturing are problematized or turned upside down. Whenever a performance lecture is announced, it is expected that there will be an irreverent take on academicism. The "genre", if it may be called so, was prefigured by John Cage's 1950 "Lecture on Nothing" and arguably first attempted by Robert Morris who, in 1964, lip-synched a recorded lecture by the famous art historian Erwin Panofsky[28]. The performance lectures of *Theatrum Anatomicum* try to formalize the

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[28] Robert Morris, *The Mind/Body Problem.* Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1994, p. 16

scripting of the lecture by treating it as a dramatic act with its own arch. In them, the relationship between image and description becomes very important, thus trying to bring the performance lecture to the era of Powerpoint. Furthermore, the performance-lectures in the book, which include one, two and even three participants, maintain a similar compositional structure to *The Witches of Tepoztlán* in that different narratives intertwine to eventually merge at the end, as it happens with fugal compositions. In the performance that gives the title to the anthology, which was presented at the PS1 Contemporary Art Center in 2002, two lecturers facing each other along with their slide projectors presented dueling lectures, one about the influence of Mexican soap operas in the world and the other about Dutch anatomical theaters of the XVIIth century. The practice has now been taken by various other institutions, more noticeably the MCA Denver[29]. In contrast, however, to more recent efforts in this regard, the idea behind Theatrum Anatomicum was not to present unrelated lecture topics, but to only present the seeming lack of relationship and through the narrative interweaving display the connection between these subjects.

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[29] http://www.mcadenver.org/index.php/programs/Mixed_Taste_Summer_Series

Parallel Lives (2003), *We all Are Streeter* (2006) and *Manifest Destiny*

(2008) all are works that follow the multiple biographical narrative

approach of *The Witches of Tepoztlán*, treating the composition as a

fugue. However, in contrast to *The Witches of Tepoztlán*, these works

were originally conceived as performance pieces that adopted the

academic script of the lecture (or in the case of *Streeter*, the panel

discussion).

The second set of works, I have chosen to retroactively name them

'parafictional panel discussions', borrowing a term developed years later

by Carrie Lambert-Beatty. For Lambert-Beatty, a number of

contemporary artists are interested in a variety of fiction that is

deceptively realistic. She describes it thus:

> Fiction or fictiveness has emerged as an important category in recent art. But, like
>
> a paramedic as opposed to a medical doctor, a parafiction is related to but not
>
> quite a member of the category of fiction as established in literary and dramatic
>
> art. It remains a bit outside. It does not perform its procedures in the hygienic
>
> clinics of literature, but has one foot in the field of the real. Unlike historical fiction's
>
> fact-based but imagined worlds, in parafiction real and/or imaginary
>
> personages and stories intersect with the world as it is being lived. Post-simulacral,
>
> parafictional strategies are oriented less toward the disappearance of the real than
>
> toward the pragmatics of trust. Simply put, with various degrees of success, for various

durations, and for various purposes, these fictions are experienced as fact.[30]

The works such as *The First Mexico City Congress of Urban Purification*

(2003), *The First Imaginary Forum of Mental Sculpture* (2004), *The*

Foreign Legion (2005) and *We all Are Streeter* (2006) all play on the

boundaries of fiction. In all these instances, the works were presented to

the attendees as panel discussions on a given subject. While these works

ranged in theatricality, in the first two instances the audience was never

told, nor was it ever evident, that the so-called symposiums were scripted

and that actors were performing. The Mexico City symposium provoked

a great debate in the press, prompting a demand by some critics to reveal

whether it had been a performance. My response, in an Op-Ed on

Mexico's largest distribution newspaper, was that the challenge for the

public was to decide which ideas were valid and which weren't based on

the ideas themselves and not on the reality or fiction of the presenters.[31]

The Mexico City Congress, as well as the other works in this group, thus

recurred to parafictional devices in order to prevent the viewers to easily

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[30] Carrie Lambert-Beatty: *Make Believe: Parafiction and Plausibility*. October Magazine
129, Summer 2009, p. 54
[31] See "Purificación Cultural y Guasas", by José Luis Paredes, and response by Pablo
Helguera, on the July 25, 2003 issue of Reforma newspaper, Mexico City.

encounter the limits between fiction and reality and thus be able to dismiss the entire event as "just art."

In summary, the works in *Theatrum Anatomicum* are closer to performance art than theater because of their undeclared nature as artworks: the events were firmly rooted in the present and the presenters often acted as themselves. This was important to do to best infilter and inhabit the academic structures and conventions that are a given in these situations and from there, going back to de Certeau and Goffman, do "la perruque" or an "out of frame" activity that would reveal the contradictions, ironies or problems of a given subject.

8. *The Juvenal Players*

The last, and most recent work in this submitted group is the play *The Juvenal Players* (2009). I have chosen to discuss this work last not only due to the chronology of these pieces, but also due to the fact that this work reunites, in practically every sense, the ideas and explorations presented so far in the other works, commenting on both the academic and non-academic script through dramaturgical metaphors and strategies.

Plays about contemporary art are rare, and even more rare are theatrical depictions of the contemporary art scene that are written from an insider's perspective. The usual clichés of artistic characters such as the tortured/bohemian artist or the eccentric collector. In my research around plays about contemporary art, I found scarce to no material that managed to depict the artworld without falling into reinforcing such clichés.

An exception may be the play "Art" (1994), by Yasmina Reza, which revolves around the purchase of an artwork by a man and the subsequent fallout of a friendship over an argument about what is art.[32] However, in

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[32] Reza, Yasmina, "Art: a play". English version, Faber & Faber, 1997

close analysis, the play is more about human relationships than about the artworld or even the very nature of art.

The Juvenal Players was the result of a commission by Grand Arts in Kansas City and consisted in a full-scale exhibition on the work of Juvenal Merst a fictional artist (whose fiction was not revealed to the audience) as well as a play presented a day after the opening night. The event was billed as a play that would be preceded by a panel discussion, when in reality the panel discussion *was* the play. In the play itself, which theoretically was about a panel discussion in memory of a deceased artist by those close to him during his life, the various participants enter into arguments around their respective memories and opinions about this artist, in this way revealing their flaws, frustrations and personal and professional conflicts. The play was presented taking great efforts to show complete verisimilitude at the beginning, simulating a panel discussion almost exactly as they occur, and as the action unfolded slowly revealing to the audience its condition of a play. In *The Juvenal Players*, the non-academic script is the artworld talk by the characters largely outlined by the *Manual of Contemporary Art Style*: the collector, the critic, the artist, the curator. The characters are invited to participate in an academic event. What then happens in this case is that the

academic script —the tightly controlled social choreography— suddenly falls apart and one can see the characters "out of frame", showing their true colors, and venting their respective frustrations. Like in the parafictional biographies of *The Witches of Tepoztlán* or in the panel discussions of *Theatrum Anatomicum*, *The Juvenal Players* plays with the patience of the spectator by immersing her in a simulated reality, later being revealed as false, but with the hopes that a glimpse or insight of the actual reality it refers may have come across.

9. Research Methods and Conclusion

The works presented here, it should be stressed once more, are part of a creative/artistic output over a period of six years. As such, the research conducted for each one of them had different focus and less structured methodology than an academic study on an individual subject. Nonetheless, I have tried to show that the concerns of all these works are closely related and constitute a expansive exploration of the subjects at hand . These conform, first, to the subject of performativity and communication in art, both structured and unstructured, and secondly, to the question of what kind of altered contexts or conditions are necessary to produce an "alternative" work. I have departed from the hypothesis, stated in section two of this introduction, that the public program constitutes a true alternative space — an alternativity of the mind, perhaps— where the status quo can be questioned and analyzed. I also concluded that the use of parafictions (in Lambert-Beatty's words), "la perruque" (de Certeau) or "out of frame" activity (Goffman) allow for the creation of an artistic experience that, in its ambiguity can be provocative and generative, as well as useful in revealing

the ways in which the social script, whether implicit or explicit, governs

behavior and communication in the artworld.

Considering Public Programs

I started this research work stating how I believe that the study of the

sociology of art, and the understanding of the social scripts of the art world,

can be an aide for the creation of public programming, inside or outside of

an institution. In this work I have attempted to show how the notion of

alternativity, which is the one main leitmotif of contemporary art practice,

can find its most effective vehicle not in the construction of a physical

location necessarily but in the conjunction between a community and a time

and place —the ultimate definition of a public program. To understand who

are the actors in this unscripted program is key to be able to produce an

event where communication will be effective, generative, and fulfilling for

the participants. I hope that in this work further researchers or arts

professional may find some initial thoughts to inspire their programming

methodologies.

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