

Anna Schaap  
Integrative Project Thesis  
April 21, 2010

### Participant Observation

Edward Ruscha said something to the effect, “A bad work of art will make you say ‘wow’ when you first see it, and later make you say ‘huh?’. But a good work of art will make you say ‘huh?’ when you first see it and later make you say ‘wow’”.<sup>1</sup> The problem as *I* see it, is many people seem to be enigmatically seduced by the ‘wow’, and overlook the ‘huh?’-that is, if they give it enough thought to arrive at a ‘huh?’. If only I understood the virtue of the ‘wow’, perhaps I would understand why the spectrum of what is considered “art” varies so greatly. I am, therefore, interested in what creates and constitutes an appealing aesthetic and why different populations and classes of people differ in their opinion about this. Is it a matter of taste, class, social construction, or possibly the veiled ideologies grounded in the historical context of such work? My research has led me to believe it is a combination of all these facets that create a seductive work that also situates for itself a place in the historical lineage of art. It was, therefore, my objective to construct a series of works that challenge taste and its assignment to class construction while fusing this with the concealed historical ideology of certain aesthetics. The fusion of these concepts ultimately led to a recognized alienation and marginalization, in the work and in making the work. From this alienated position, collectives form, similar to families, and collaboration becomes a key component to the concept, simultaneously attacking the idea of autonomy.

---

<sup>1</sup> Fellow artists and friend, Jason Sudak, told me this once and it stuck with me-I can’t help but agree with that statement. The work I find most compelling is not work that will hit you over the head with its message or physical appeal, but rather, work that allows you the opportunity to understand it. Though this quote by Ed Ruscha can be found all over, I did manage to find it on a bog- the blog is in the Cited sources under the author Nicole Berry.

The Artists Komar and Melamid did a series called the People's Choice where they polled 11 countries on what constituted the most wanted and unwanted things in a painting.<sup>2</sup> Though the final assemblage of paintings differed greatly in appearance from country to country, one thing nearly all of them had in common was a resounding like of, and desire for, the representation of natural aesthetics- landscapic depictions of the natural world. What is of particular interest to me is the use of the poll to determine the *general public's* desire for the natural aesthetic. This was, in fact, the broad public's opinion on art- not artists, or the critical art world. This natural aesthetic is therefore a pervasively used, iconic-image generator, especially for the general public- or middle class. It is my intention to understand why- why the 'wow'. Why is this natural aesthetic so desired? Through the research I have come across, I concluded that the historical ideologies at play in works using this 'natural aesthetic' are what tie them so closely to the traditional, middle class- and as a way of addressing my desired alienation from this found connection I have created a series of works that breed the ideologies of the former, with ideological theories that stand in direct opposition to the historical ideologies at work in the landscape painting- in order to break apart and re-contextualize what is at play.

In order to address what was at work, I needed to understand what I was looking at. So I didactically broke apart the landscape painting itself, and I used Kinkade's work as a sounding board for this.<sup>3</sup> In an article on the artist Marc Handelman, by Karen Rosenberg, in an issue of Artforum, Handelman breaks apart the ideologies of the

---

<sup>2</sup> You can find the work from this series on the DIA Center for the Art's page about Komar and Melamid's *Most Wanted* series. (<http://awp.diaart.org/km/>)

<sup>3</sup> See Figure 1 for an example of Kinkade's work.

landscape painting.<sup>4</sup> What I gathered from what he said was there are three spaces at work within these paintings. The first is the foreground- it represents something industrial, a present day remnant, like a boat, or a house, or even people: evidence of civilization. The second is the middle ground- it represents the past, or a wild frontier: land to be claimed, conquered, or controlled. The last part is the background- it represents something sublime with its ever-expanding mountain range or the vastness of the sky: it is an endlessness or a future.

From there I wanted to address the personal relationships people had to these works, so I looked to my own personal relationships. By confronting people's relationships to these works- these things that hang in our houses, above our couches, and decorate our bare walls- I was not only addressing *their* relationship to these works, but also wrestling with *my* relationship to their relationship to these things. I did a series of photographs of people, my family namely, in their houses, with their landscape paintings.<sup>5</sup> I used my family because I know them, love and appreciate them all the same, but they are also still very much apart of the middle class or general public. By using family I was also using work I was familiar with- these paintings, drawings and photographs hang in houses I was raised in and visited often. I too had a personal relationship to the work as much as I had a relationship to the people that owned them.

My next objective was to create a film that started to break apart the ideologies working in the landscape painting. I wanted the film to take on a "formlessness"<sup>6</sup>- a formlessness that leads to the blurring of the distinction between film (what I want to make) and painting (the landscape paintings), painting and photograph (the final

---

<sup>4</sup> The article was an art review of Handelman's work, titled, "Marc Handelman at Lombard-Freid Fine Arts".

<sup>5</sup> See Figures 2-5 for examples of this work.

<sup>6</sup> The idea of "formlessness" come from writings by Bataille, but in this paper, is elaborated on in an article by Rosalind Krauss.

assemblage of ideas I created). In an article titled *Bachelors* by Rosalind Krauss, in an issue of October Magazine, she talked about the ideologies at work when prominent media are fused together,

“As a blurring of the distinction between photograph and painting, or photograph and film, they constituted a perverse feminization if you will of the masculinist values of ‘straightness’ itself: clarity, decisiveness, and visual mastery- all of them a source for the photograph’s authority.”

Historically, these landscape paintings served the westward expansion movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as was their time of definitive prominence. It used the idea of conquering the land to portray a sense of mastery over the land, or over the “natural sublime”,<sup>7</sup> rather. It was a yearning to conquer nature, as it was such a powerful, unpredictable, and often destructive force during the westward move. Elaborating on Krauss’s idea, land or “nature” has always been prescribed as inherently female- always the pro-noun “she” in descriptive terms. So bringing the historical purpose of the landscape paintings back in, conquering land becomes a very aggressive, masculinized view of conquering traditionally white, heterosexual male adversaries: women, children, babies, birth, female regenerative forces- things that ultimately relinquish control and independence<sup>8</sup>. So penetrating the idea of formlessness, if the landscape painting (a stylized view of nature) served to produce a sense of mastery, I wanted to use those same types of images (stylized views of nature) to re-establish the relationship of master to mastered, and the singularity of those roles by addressing the function of the collective.

Expanding on the idea of the formless, and the blurring of boundaries, I wanted to confront the ideologies at work in the landscape paintings with something that (in an

---

<sup>7</sup> The natural sublime is idea that nature has the awe-ing power to destroy civilization at any time without reason or warning.

<sup>8</sup> The cultivation of this concept came from a conversation with another student (Jason Sudak) who was writing a paper on Picasso- he obliged me in my desire to use this idea/phrase in my work and thesis.

ideological sense) is directly oppositional to that. As Krauss writes in *Bachelors*, on Bataille's idea of the "formless", "This formlessness, or blurring of boundaries, involves a transgression of boundaries- there is a cancellation of the distinction of high and low, between animal and human." In this case, it also becomes a cancellation of the distinction between purpose and absurdity, between mastery and mastered, between civilization and its opposite: primitivism (before civilization). And ultimately, there is no longer a distinction made between "art" and stylistically, contemporary, cultural trends. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century the landscape painting served this trend, today it is the youth culture of the decadent, uncontrollable, uncivilizable, primal being. I embarked on a series of photographs that perversely collided these two ideas, drawing on the ideologies of both.<sup>9</sup> In these photos, there is the presence of civilization or humanity- it is the people themselves- but when this 'humanity' is not conquering, is not civilizing the land (or 'Mother Nature'), "gender bodies begin to slip" (Krauss uses this phrase in *Bachelors*). When the feminized land is not being mastered, but instead is the dominant setting for a little cult of primal, youthful, characters to exist, it then dominates and takes on the masculinized role.

This little cult of characters however, incorporates ideas from, (as Michelle Thomas says in the article *Primitivism*), "The 19<sup>th</sup> century movement of Romanticism, with their nostalgic quest for a return to an earlier state of grace free from the adulteration [of western civilized life]". Nowadays, however, primitivism is, "The artistic [both visual and literary] representation and celebration of tribal people", people who were not touched by colonization. (White page 1) They are, "Homogenous societies located beyond the frontiers of the civilized world," (White, page 2)

---

<sup>9</sup> See figure 7-14 for final photographic series.

I wanted to create an other-worldliness from something so anti-western ideology that it is counter-intuitive to the landscapes and therefore renders them absurd. These pictures are a play on that absurdity: these character's absurdness- and their alienation from whatever culture these beings are from and the land they now reside in. The character's relationship to the landscape is a visualization of the conflicting ideologies of the landscape painting and the idea of primitivism in art.

Ultimately, Primitivism was, "An attempt at a break with bourgeois society by exploring its opposite-its uncivilized, its rawness, its liberated mind- free from western ideals-free from defining western traditions"<sup>10</sup>, even and especially in artistic practice. I think for many artists, the exploration and interest in other cultures is a way out of entrapment in normative society, while also being a way to view your own culture from the outside. Artists like Picasso and Gauguin used this in their art. Quoting an article on primitivism by Michelle Thomas, she said, "In his wish to emulate 'the primitive', Gauguin attempted to adopt a more instinctive state of mind which later became associated with madness, neurosis, and the naive outlook of the child." And that is really what these characters are about. An absurdness, a nostalgia, and a naiveness about returning to a place outside of civilization (but because they are youthful cultural trends- they are the epitome of civilization)- the same naiveness in the ideology of the landscape painting. They are just milling about in these photographs, posing themselves in the land, but not really a part of it. By not engaging in the land, they are not mastering it, but rather flipping that relationship and being mastered by it, in their naiveness. You see them trying to fit in, "look we found this giant animal skull, this feels right. This is right. We look right, don't we?" However, they clearly are not from this place -one of them

---

<sup>10</sup> This is from an abstract of the article *Modernist Primitivism: seeking the lost primitive other in works of Georges Bataille, Michel Leiris, and Rene Char*, written by Nevine Demian.

has tennis shoes on, the other has sweatpants on under his wrap, one girl is dragging around an old doll on a shoestring and the other has a bronze deer sculpture tucked under her arm like she just swiped it from someone's mantle somewhere. The actual composition of the photos is mostly meant to mirror, and speak to, the breakdown of the three spaces functioning within landscape paintings themselves. All the while, they represent the clashing of these two opposing ideologies, which culminates in the aesthetization of the absurd and alienated- a posed 'otherness'- and ultimately of the aesthetization of the middle class alienation.

However, by posing a binary of 'civilized world verse otherness' it presents both a challenge and an opportunity. The challenge is that the work is now exploring ethnographic principles (and all of the ethical issues that encompasses), but in doing so, offers an opportunity for self-observation, by the very nature of ethnographic work.

“The ethnographic label suggests here a characteristic attitude of participant observation among the artifacts of a defamiliarized culturally reality. The surrealists were intensely interested in exotic worlds, among which they included a certain Paris. Their attitude, while comparable to that of the fieldworker who strives to render the unfamiliar comprehensible, tended to work in the reverse sense, making the familiar strange.” (page 542 Clifford)

The characters in the photos are addressing the fallacy of ethnographic practice as 'presenting another culture'. When ethnographic works are created, they are not a representation of another culture, but of that artists/filmmakers interpretation of that culture. The characters in the photos are posed as if representing an 'other' cultural aesthetic, but the overall look of the photos as some hipster-kitsch-fashion pastiche mixed with hints of the normative world from which they were made, offers a thread of dialog concerning the self-observation involved in ethnographic work- while rendering the familiar world from where they came, completely unfamiliar.

It was an interest in the self-observation or ‘participation’ in ethnography that spurred the final film for the exhibition. Once again, it was a clashing of two opposing cultures and ideologies. But by posing the film as a type of ethnographic-surrealist film (where multiple identities slip in and out of each other), participant observation became essential to talk about the borders between identities, cultures, and experiences, and how they can collide and build back something new- a type of cultural-consumerist hybrid. Thus where the title for the film comes from: Borderland. The film takes these two realities that seemingly do not belong together (or two cultures, in ethnographic terms), which are represented by two unrelated identities in the film, and two kinds of communities, and it weaves them together, symbolic of the way ethnography weaves cultures together by presenting the artists interpretation of a culture. In the film, I took a story from my hometown, a story very much a part of an insular, small community vernacular, and created an alternative reality from its existence. An ethnographic fiction that usurps the vernacular of the community into an existence that offers a life outside of that community (which stems from the border between the civilized world and it’s ‘primitive’ opposite), while simultaneously talking about the community’s fear of that ‘otherness’.

This adoption of ‘otherness’ to create work is an artistic practice with a long historical lineage. It is an *interest* in other cultures that creates a desire for *participation* in other cultures, while still being able to stay apart of one’s own culture. It was apparent to me that the infusion of ‘otherness’ in artistic aesthetics was not just a current trend, but again it was about participant observation- a way of viewing your own culture by ‘participating’, or using, others. I personally knew of a few other artists dealing with these same ideas and thought it was interesting to pull all of us together. Being drawn to



the community of artists around me addressing these same issues (advertently or inadvertently) did not seem strange, but in fact, almost necessary to offer multiple perspectives on how artist 'participate' in ethnography. In addition, a simple fact about my work is that it often cannot be done alone. I almost always work with a familial-like group of people- like those in the photos, or collaborators on films. Though the concept of Primitivism was meant to break apart traditional hegemonic ideologies, it also created a kind of 'family' in that otherness and alienation from the Western civilized world. The characters in the pictures were marginalized and alienated because of their invented otherness, and so they formed a collective- a family in which to thrive. For the final exhibition, assembling a group of artists all working with these ideas of 'participant ethnography', could be viewed as a representation for the artist's practice. The artist commonly works from a marginalized position, but finds other artists to work with in order to breed ideas, sympathies, collaborative work, and ultimately create a dialog about a compulsion towards an idea and its relationship to the artist's practice. I address this relationship in the photos, and again reiterate it in the final films. Building a collective not only challenges the ideas of the autonomous 'genius-artist', but also recognizes the group as fostering an artistic wellspring. This concept is brought to full actualization through the final exhibition of work. In recognizing the collective, I curated four other artists (two of whom are not in the Art and Design program) into my allotted exhibition space- all of the work exploring the ideas of alienation, marginalization, the concept of participant ethnography, and the idea of the collective, while conceptually concreting it as a curated show.

## Cited Sources

1. Huysmans, Joris-Karl. *Against the Grain*. New York: Albert and Charles Boni, 1930. Print.
2. Rosenberg, Karen. "Marc Handelman at Lombard-Freid Fine Arts." Artforum. December 2004, page 198. Print.
3. Berry, Nicole. "Panel on Criticism". Accessible Art. Web.mac.com. November 28 2008. Web. 3 Jan 2010 <<http://web.mac.com/nic226/iWeb/Accessible%20Art/Blog/4E2185B0-1631-4FED-9B3A-CAA11DC68EA5.html>>.
4. Clifford, James. "On Ethnographic Surrealism". Jstor. Comparative Studies in Society and History Vol. 23. No.4. October 1981. April 2010. <<http://www.scribd.com/doc/23760262/Clifford-On-Ethnographic-Surrealism>>
5. Demian, Nevine Nabil. "Modernist Primitivism: seeking the lost primitive other in works of Geroges Bataille, Michel Leiris, and Rene Char". Drc.ohiolink.edu, Digital Resource Commons OhioLINK (2003): abstract. Web. 24 November 2009 <<http://drc.ohiolink.edu/handle/2374.OX/4523>>.
6. Govan, Michael. "Komar and Melamid: The Most Wanted Paintings *on the web*". Diaart.org. Web. 1 Jan 2010 <<http://awp.diaart.org/km/>>.
7. Krauss, Rosalind E. "Bachelors." Worldcat.org, October Magazine MIT Press (1999): 1-5. Proquest. Web. 6 December 2009.
8. Thomas, Michelle. "Primitivism: Nouveau Larousse illustre, Red Stone Dancer, Les Demoiselles d' Avignon, style negre, The Couple." Arts.Jrank.org. 2009. Web. 6 December 2009 <<http://arts.jrank.org/pages/16488/primitivism.html>>.
9. White, Jonathan David. "'It's a So-Called Civilized World': American Pop Primitivism and The Cramps." AmericanPopularCulture.com, Americana The journal of American popular Culture 1900 to Present (2002): 1-10. Web. 25 November 2009.

Visuals



(Figure 1)



(Figure 2)



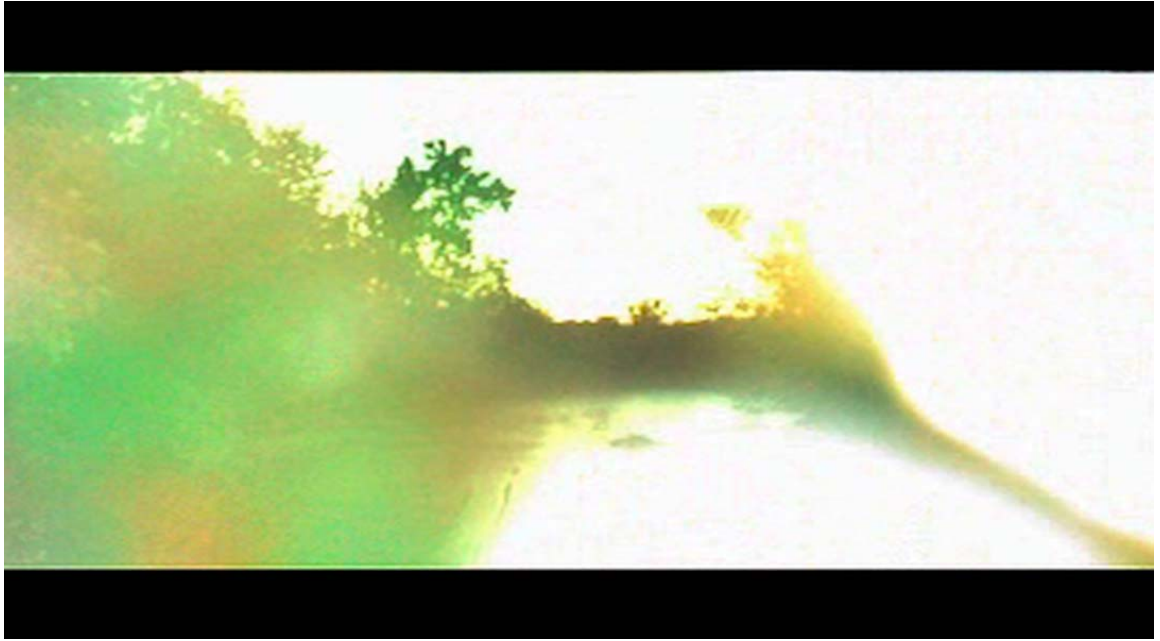
(Figure 3)



(Figure 4)



(Figure 5)



(Figure 6)



(Figure 7)



(Figure 8)



(Figure 9)



(Figure 10)





(Figure 11)



(Figure 12)



(Figure 13)



(Figure 14)