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Trouble Every Day

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Trouble Every Day

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Fine Arts
Digital and Trans Media

by

Nina Schwanse
B.F.A. Cooper Union, 2005

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ABSTRACT

My interests lie in the intersection of the public and private, the corporate and personal, especially with regard to self-representation within cultural power structures. Utilizing video and web technologies, performance, and painting, I create imagined realms of fantasy, desire, obsession, and anxiety. Operating within, but not bound by, feminist discourse, my work explores the vehicles and effects by which both analog and digital technologies influence the relationship between the self and the object of desire (whether physical or virtual, interior or exterior to the body) and have produced both progressive and regressive offspring. By performing the role of both *producer* of cultural archetypes and the compulsive *consumer* of signs, my characters embody the representation(s) of their source but, through action and voice, invent a mutant surrogate who dictates its own agency.

New Media, Video Art, Performance Art, Feminism

INTRODUCTION

An old Chevy pickup truck sits abandoned in a vacant back lot. Nearby a woman is relaxing on a pool chair, her eyes focused on the snow being emitted from an old television. She wears a long cream-colored wool coat over her black bikini. On her feet are work boots; on her face are safety goggles. She rises and removes her coat, placing it coolly on the back of the chair. Strewn across the ground amongst dirt and weeds are brushes, rags, sponges, buckets of green paint and water, and a convenient backpack-style garden sprayer. Somewhat disinterested, the woman hikes the sprayer onto her back and dispenses its bright green contents onto the truck. She moves on to the brushes, rags, and sponges, simultaneously coating the vehicle with the chroma-key color and washing her work away with subsequent gestures. Circling and climbing the old Chevy, she does a thorough if not sloppy job; her marks are apparent. In the truck's bed she finds a metal baseball bat and takes aim at its body, hitting it with full force, putting her whole body into every impact. The city's urban hum is pierced by the echoing crash of metal beating metal. Determinedly and methodically, she batters the vehicle at single-second intervals until she is exhausted, at which point she returns to the lawn chair and television. After a few minutes, with her strength restored, she repeats the process.

Version Girl's Auto Wash and Detailing (2011) was a one-night performance that conflated my interests in the body, advertising, labor, violence, and the traditional art practice of painting. A spin on the bikini car wash, this two-hour performance presents conventional, sexualized femininity as an act of confrontation. Though scantily clad, Version Girl takes on a masculine identity through her blue-collar mentality and

aggressive interaction with the vehicle. In contrast to the traditional bikini car wash, the acts of her labor do not play to the male viewer. Her gesture is exclusively for the truck, an object of both desire and contempt and a stand-in for the presumably male audience. Cultural artifacts (bikini, automobile, car wash) have been appropriated, but through a durational, disjunctive narrative strategy and symbolic manipulations, the origin's psychological and political objectives have been subverted. Operating within, but not bound by, contemporary feminist and post-structuralist discourse, my work explores the vehicles and effects by which performative practices and digital technologies influence the relationship between the self and the object of desire (whether physical or virtual, interior or exterior to the body) and have produced both progressive and regressive offspring.



Figure 1- Performance, *Version Girl's Auto Wash and Detailing* (2011) [Photo: Jason Derouin]

ORIGINS & CONTEXT

My practice can be traced along two distinct lineages, both of which relate to the performance of self as a reflection of and/or challenge to reified commodity images of gender. The first is character-based self-portraiture as first exemplified by the photography of Claude Cahun. Far ahead of her time, Cahun's radical work is often overshadowed by her male Surrealist colleagues. Posing in androgynous costume and often utilizing masks and props as fetishistic phallic displacements, these early affronts to singular identity remain eerily timeless while located in the specific moment of pre-World War II modernism. Consider Cahun's project alongside Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project*; through critical observation, Benjamin's unfinished collection of critical observations presents a similarly disjointed, "post-modern" view of city life in Paris on the verge of political and social upheaval.

More ubiquitous and contemporaneously relevant are Cindy Sherman's caricatures of femininity, beginning with her 1979 series *Untitled Film Stills* through her later *Untitled* works in the 1980s. Responding to the spectacle of consumerism prophesized by Guy Debord, Sherman's work follows the trajectory initiated by Cahun but locates it specifically in American popular culture. At the time, these cold, distant photographic representations of the self as an archetypical other were a departure from both minimalist and romantic conceptions of what art should look like and be about. As many critics and theorists have elaborated upon, Sherman appropriates image signifiers from cinema, advertising, fashion and art history and re-invents them, most often using her own meticulously posed and costumed face and/or body. Rather than quoting a

specific source, Sherman's host material remains only vaguely familiar. She thereby brilliantly taps into subconscious cultural memory to highlight how pervasively expectations of the feminine have penetrated our society, and also how dependent on commodity image our collective identity has become.

Sherman's use of cinematic clues, including makeup, costuming and props, camera angle, composition, depth of field, etc. imply situations that the audience is already familiar with, though they lack narrative specificity beyond the single frame. What Sherman and Cahun do with still photography I attempt to expand via time-based media. Enabling would-be caricatures to perform actions independent of their appropriated image or informational "text" opens up more complicated readings of existing identity signifiers and proposes creative possibilities for self-representation.

Another history from which my work draws heavily is the body-oriented work of feminist artists in the 1970s. Like many of these women working forty years ago, I use myself as model in every video and performance I have made thus far. This again places my work within a tradition of self-portraiture, though I consider myself a prop or instrument for larger truths and contradictions, rather than speaking directly from my personal history. I am not comfortable exploiting another person's physical, psychological or emotional state in order to achieve the necessary effect for a given piece. Rigorous self-exploitation is exhausting but has become an integral element of my process.

In *Squirting RGB216X* (2011), I utilize the painted gesture and apply it to my own body. One of my least character-driven works, this video opens with me sitting atop a pedestal in my underwear, wearing a brunette wig that has been fashioned into long

pigtails. Staring directly at the video camera, I go through a series of seductive and awkward poses that conjure moments from art history and fashion advertisements. The pedestal and background are keyed out and have been replaced with solid flashing colors at single frame intervals; this chromatic arrangement is based on the 216 web-safe colors in alphanumeric order. After a few moments, I lift a bottle and begin squirting myself with green screen paint. The paint is also keyed and therefore the marks made on my body disappear into the background. As the performance progresses, my body almost completely disappears under the gesture of wet paint upon its surface. The only audio throughout this single take is the sound of liquid squirting, my uncomfortable moans as the paint gets into my mouth and eyes, and a fan running in the background.

From the pedestal to the poses, *Squirting RGB216x* intends to confront the male gaze and question how viewing conditions have shifted with digital technologies. Though situated in a studio environment, the pedestal references the museum while the body functions as a stand-in for traditional figurative sculpture. (In *Squirting RAW*—the unkeyed version—green canvases are visible hanging salon-style on the wall behind the pedestal.) Thus situated in an art context, the piece sets up a traditional viewing experience; the female body is on full display for the exclusive pleasure of the looker. However, the physical materiality of the paint responds to the model's actions over time, and is further mediated by the camera and post-production technology to disrupt gaze of the viewer.



Figure 2 – Video still, *Squirting RGB216x* (2011)

Painting is the aesthetic language in which women have historically been most objectified, surpassed only in the last century by photography and cinema. In *Squirting* these mediums join together under an aesthetic of *disappearance*, rather than appearance. The body is negated through the application of a substance, a gesture that bears a specific

psychological resemblance not to painting, but to male ejaculation. But this ejaculatory gesture, enacted by the object of desire herself, effectively disintegrates the figure. This creates an effect of alienation from the viewer; though the skin is exposed the body is cold and impossible to visually grasp.

Despite these concerns, this piece still sexualizes the female body. This operates within the aforementioned trajectory of second-wave feminist artists who used their bodies in order to make a statement, prove a point, horrify, seduce, or educate. Carolee Schneemann intentionally eroticized her body in order to explore its physical limits, and portray an unrepressed, non-violent image of female sexuality. Her *Fuses* (1967) is considered the first piece of feminist erotic film, and *Interior Scroll* (1975) notoriously confronted the male-dominated art world's sexist power structure via Schneemann's vagina. Hannah Wilke, too, had no fear of placing her naked body on display, or of the retaliation it would generate from mainstream feminism. In *Starification Object Series* (1975), a group of photographs in which she is topless and adorned with vulva-like forms fashioned from chewing gum, Wilke mimics poses from women's magazine advertisements. Most influential is Lynda Benglis' infamous November 1974 *Artforum* ad. Naked, tan and oiled, but with cropped hair and a double dildo protruding from her genitals, Benglis created a female monster who is sexy but threatening, feminine but emasculating, and ultimately resists any straightforward interpretation, further emphasized by her dark sunglasses that deflect the viewer's gaze. Her use of "ad space" to disseminate her work beyond the walls of the gallery also effectively converts an art world publication into a site of sexual politics.

UNPOPULAR CULTURE

Like Schneemann, Wilke, and Benglis, I'm not hesitant to sexualize my own body, or my work, in order to respond to what remains a culture of violence. Though the art world, in part, has evolved to praise and validate an almost equal number of female artists, much of mainstream culture remains largely misogynist. Advertising, television, music and (what passes as) cinema continue to proliferate bigoted representations of both feminine and masculine identity that reinforce power relationships against which much of the last century was spent fighting. In our supposed "post-feminist," "post-race" environment, much of cultural production still prescribes an excess of gender and ethnic stereotypes as commodity lifestyle. Whether dictated by high culture (fashion) or low (Jersey Shore), the message is similar and carried via coded visual and narrative signifiers. With an expanded fetish vocabulary and more efficient methods of communication, corporate consumerism simultaneously markets ignorance and submission while converting human action into saleable data. How can this objectification and dehumanization be subversively resisted in everyday life?

It is in this space of confluence, where culture and politics intersect with private life, that I find an opportunity for creative intervention. I draw inspiration from both popular and *unpopular* cultures. Pop culture can be defined as the process by which material information is disseminated through consumption. Privately owned cultural information becomes public psychological property and is integrated into the private lives of its consumers. The same happens with counter-cultural movements, as they are eventually assimilated into the larger mainstream they initially reacted against. Neither

can account for the contradictions and idiosyncrasies that inform marginalized identities and subversive body politics. This instability of the self in society and the *unpopular* culture it generates is the subject of my work. Through a hybridized regurgitation of celebrity, the avatar, the violence of images (still and moving) and the self-portrait, my work renegotiates the contours of gender roles and promotional identity tactics. Subconscious cultural entities are externalized through characters that enact these larger conflicts.

BODIES OF LABOR

The notion of the gaze has been widely theorized in terms of the objectification of the female body. Over the course of the last two decades, the threshold between viewer and viewed has coalesced as a result of new technologies that allow for expanded forms of self-representation. With tools such as social networking sites and web-cams in popular circulation, users of both sexes simultaneously occupy the position of subject and object through a networked exchange of self-portraiture. Despite this step toward agency in the mediation of the self, technology has also contributed violent misfortunes that reinforce a masculine chauvinist way of vision. This is most readily witnessed in the pornography industry, where relationships of power and control are paramount beneath the surface titillation of image and narrative.

With this in mind, *Babe-Rental.com* (2011) attempts to subvert the male gaze by positing a faux web-cam company. Whereas Sherman's work addressed the cinematic gaze via still photography, my web-based project confronts the world of internet porn head-on under a guise in close proximity to reality. This deceptively real site features a selection of twelve call girls, each filling a different archetype that may appeal to a customer's special interests. Operating within the technological boundaries of the commercial porn industry sets up an effective (web)site to undermine its ideological implications.

Though the site itself contains no actual pornographic imagery, its home page bears a standard warning regarding adult content. Upon clicking to "enter," the visitor is taken to a menu of animated gifs to make his or her viewing choice. Each links to a

(supposed but not actual) live feed video of varying lengths in which a woman, partially dressed and with a prop to match her personality, awkwardly “performs” for the camera. Though each bears distinct characteristics that mark her particular appeal, they are essentially interchangeable representations of already culturally existent displays of highly sexualized femininity. There are twelve “babes” to chose from, each to represent a different month in the year and therefore a calendar page. They are in a void, a black hole that removes their existence from any established setting; this blank site provides an empty backdrop against which this singular body mutates between characters.



Figure 3 – Video still from website, *Babe-Rental.com* (Heidi) 2011

The Babe-Rental workers' identification with a fetish object points to sexual disavowal, but besides their outfits, there isn't too much that's sexy about these videos. The image is disjointed by severe differences in video quality, and frequently interrupted by close-ups that don't make sense. Their actions consist of repeating certain non-sexual tasks, and reciting and (often incorrectly) spelling their names: Carmen, Bunny, Darlene, etc. For the most part, there is a lack of escalation and conclusion, a lack of narrative in general. In essence these are sex workers who don't deliver, so why do they even exist? They gaze directly into the camera, but one gets a sense that they are producing these videos for themselves, and collectively they function to form a single identity.

These bodies combine into a single corporate unit—as individuals they are protected by their pseudonyms and by their umbrella organization. The Babe-Rental company brand also engages in similar marketing strategies that are employed by legitimate corporations. For instance, they manufacture call-girl cards that recreate the Vegas porn aesthetic but leave out essential contact information. Leaving these souvenirs on the streets and in bathrooms, I can direct unassuming customers/ potential audiences to the website. Navigating this fine line between art and reality is something I explore further in public performances.

Babe-Rental.com took on a live routine in *Babe-Rental.com Marketing Strategy #6: Community Outreach* (2011), a public performance in the French Quarter for a non-art audience. The twelve faux sex workers combined into a single entity and walked Bourbon Street, New Orleans distributing the call-girl cards and “trying to find a job.” Combining these twelve virtual characters into a single physical body resulted in a schizophrenic personality that had difficulty adapting to the challenges of real-world

interaction. Greeted with enthusiasm, skepticism, disdain or outright disinterest by the public, “Carmen/Jennifer/Allison et al” demonstrated, if nothing else, how essentially *un-*out-of-place she was among the strippers, drunks, street freaks and service industry workers that occupy any tourist hotspot, thereby highlighting the dysfunctional functionality of a location rich with human purchasing capital.

Community Outreach marked my first foray into public performance. Accustomed to working in total isolation during both my research and production process in the studio, I started feeling the need to bring my work back into the culture from whence it came. The mutated “Twelve-In-One” sex worker fits in superficially *as image* with the source material from which she is appropriated, but she is psychologically isolated from her colleagues and potential customers. This struggle for collective identification within an alienating popular society is something I explore further.

My next performance-based project, *The Comeback* (2012), explores another manifestation of self-definition in public space. Similarly enacted in both private space (the artist’s studio) and the public arena (sports fandom), this multi-faceted piece expands upon the ideas of body politics and psychological trauma.

Meet Bree Andrews, a local football fan who engages in an everyday struggle to manage her reality. Bree’s fandom extends into obsession, fueled primarily by her inability to understand why she does not possess the physique to play in the National Football League. The problem is her breasts, which she views as cancerous growths.

Despite her disability, she believes that her body was cloned from the DNA of star quarterback Drew Brees through a scientific effort to cure breast cancer. If she follows his mantras and puts forth full effort, not only will they find a cancer cure together, but also her dreams of playing on the field will come true. If only she had a chance, she could prove her prowess to him and the world.



Figure 4 – Video still, *The Comeback* (2012)

In the video component to this project, we see a petite female with short dark hair attend a football game at the Superdome, New Orleans. The full football gear she wears, including cleats and helmet, appear very dirty, though she is in fact covered with paint. It appears that she fits in with the other fans, but as the game progresses it becomes clear that she is very much alone in her own world. Her interactions with other fans are

minimal but civil; she feels like she has a responsibility to *do something* and she takes herself very seriously.

This character's delusions stem from the emotional and psychological strain that accompanies trauma, both individual and collective. Bree's symbolic confusion of self and her desire to attain the physically and culturally impossible is symptomatic of larger struggles to identify oneself in a culture that prescribes normative gender roles. Her schizophrenia functions as a displacement of her self-deprecation-- a by-product of her injury, which remains ambiguous. Whether a shot to the head, a fall, or a nervous breakdown, her specific trauma has mutated into a single all-encompassing physical event.

Bree Andrews is also a local artist. In addition to obsessively reciting Drew Brees' advice in how to "unleash the hidden power of adversity" (mantras extracted from his autobiography), she repeatedly paints small portraits of him. She also obsessively practices her own signature, which doubles as an autograph, the most prized memento of a fan encounter (the resulting scribbled product resembles a cross between Pollock and Twombly). Bree's self-esteem is reinforced by these two strands of identity marking; her absence of self is filled by the repetitive autograph gesture associated with the Ab-Ex macho man, as the oil portraits of Brees on her wall resemble a teenager's bedroom turned artist studio as she searches for a way to define her identity according to her surrounding culture.

Though the small portraits of Drew Brees are an extension of the obsessive gesture, this body of work is also how she markets, and therefore defines herself, as "local artist" to the community. Here under critique is the local art marketing system as a

microcosm of the capital-driven art world at large, where artists often produce in seriality in order to meet the demands of collectors and gallerists. Further, in our contemporary situation, the artist often must act as entrepreneur; how often do we see seminars with titles like “The Business of Art” that cater specifically to the “local artist” community? Bree Andrews manages to create outside of this value system precisely by way of being a dysfunctional loner. Though this may carry attachment to stereotypical notions of the romantic artist who works in isolation, here it functions as a subversion of signifiers that attempt to delineate the artist’s identity.

The video *Live Report* features another protagonist navigating the public/private at the edge of social communications. This piece opens with a blank greenscreen and the sound of heavy traffic. A woman appears, her face bruised and makeup messy. The video cuts to an overpass construction zone, where we see the same woman wandering around with a microphone. We follow this transplanted individual, dressed in a bright orange blazer and fluorescent yellow safety vest, as she navigates this torn geography, the cause of the traffic congestion that interests her as a reporter. We hear her interior monologue, which refers to her current predicament and reflections on a “him” of the past. Over the course of the narrative, it is revealed that this woman is lost and has undergone some kind of trauma.

This traffic reporter’s origins and identity remain unknown. She could be homeless, or recently released from an institution. Her own instability is reflected in the

ravaged infrastructure around her; she unconsciously traverses construction zones in an attempt to restructure her identity. Though lost, this is the landscape in which she feels most comfortable. Due to her lack of self, she has only her work to identify with, and thus takes her job very seriously, even though it is a position of self-invention.

Placing our heroine against this backdrop plays on the sexualization of female local news reporters, transferring her to a traditionally masculine setting. The local broadcasting studio is a space in which female representation is proliferated according to specific cultural standards of femininity. One need only perform a simple YouTube search to find endless examples of a “hot” or “sexy” newsperson; cleavage or a mini-skirt is a common bonus to the already objectified reporter. This type of publicity is detrimental to building a strong female identity that is independent of the masculine gaze of authority. The physically public space in *Live Report*, however, already removes the backdrop of the studio screen on which the female image is projected. By re-positioning herself in an oppressive and alienating outdoor space, and actually occupying the streets and the often misogyny-plagued zones of “road work” and construction, our reporter defamiliarizes a coded public domain that is taken for granted in the everyday.

Acting out a gendered professional role in a public place (television, internet, and outdoors) comes with a certain set of expectations, some to which she still conforms despite her struggle to re-imagine her identity. She wears high heels, a memento from a former relationship of which she is unable to completely let go. Like *The Comeback*, this piece is ultimately about recovery. However, it also brings up issues of surveillance and privacy. A reporter’s voice runs continuously in the background detailing the Intelligent Transportation System, an actual worldwide intelligence network devoted to traffic

communication technology. While our character is being tracked by her own cameraperson, the vehicles that surround her are being monitored by a variety of invasive technologies. Traffic cameras detect vehicle activity, while GPS systems attached to cars and smart phones monitor user location and activity. This data is then given to homeland security, which funds many projects of the transportation intelligence network. The same is true with privacy policies on the internet, where it is more likely one's information will be sold to marketing companies. Private space is literally disappearing. (It is for this reason that I continue to find value in painting and performative practices; it is much harder for these mediums to be converted into data.)



Figure 5 – Video still, *Live Report* (2012)

As seen in *Live Report*, the untreated greenscreen can be understood as a lack of information, an empty space on which any fantasy can be projected. In *Civil Realness: Grant vs. Lee*, two masculine historical war heroes re-stage a series of battles for a final showdown against a green studio backdrop. In this re-enactment, however, generals Ulysses S. Grant and Robert E. Lee are represented as two drag queens. The gender bending is four-fold: in both personas, I, a female, am in the role of a drag queen (a man playing a woman), who in turn is playing a historically masculine role. The resulting equation is: a woman = a (man as a woman) = a man. The gender of the two characters is ultimately indeterminable, though the concluding Mariah Carey lip synch sequence would favor the feminine. In addition to borrowing Carey's ballad, most of the dialog for this piece was appropriated from the 1990's MTV show *Celebrity Death Match*, a stop-motion animation blood and gore celebration of crude dude humor. In using this as source material, I intentionally feminize/queer not just a historically masculine military event but also its popular mythology as demonstrated by cable television.

Television is further referenced by the inclusion of the naked green screen. Here, the screen is left unmanipulated by post-production keying techniques. Its role as a placeholder for a fantastical backdrop for action is made obvious. The screen is a surface onto which anything can be projected, whether a series of images, an idea, or a body. Thus the green screen serves as a philosophical symbol for the video screen itself, a space in which psychic desires and politics of the body are often enacted. In *Civil Realness*, the seemingly whimsical voguing contest still references the real physical horror of the Civil War; the trauma of the twisted gendered body is conflated with wartime catastrophe.



Figure 6 – Video still, *Civil Realness: Grant vs. Lee* (2012)

CONCLUSION

Over the course of the last few years and the projects discussed, I've elaborated and refined my process of creating alternative mythologies to societal expectations using the excesses of culture and limits of personal experience as inspiration. Several artists working today also use the self as model to enact larger cultural conflicts and contradictions. Kalup Linzy invents stereotype-driven but highly personal alternate pop realities that meander gender and race relations to achieve an agency of the individual over the pressures of society. Stanya Kahn, in both her collaborations with Harry Dodge and her more recent solo work, creates videos that blur the line of reality and fiction by staging and improvising situations that explore the relationship between identity and trauma at the edge of sanity. It is along this trajectory that I would locate the work I completed during my graduate studies, and will continue to pursue as an artist in the professional field.

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VITA

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