

2012

# Artist Alien Ghost Juggler: Performance of “Troilus and Cressida” as Graduate Thesis

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**Artist Alien Ghost Juggler:  
Performance of “Troilus and Cressida” as Graduate Thesis**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master  
of Fine Art at Virginia Commonwealth University.

BY

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2012

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## **Thesis Abstract**

Through an analysis of my adaptation of Shakespeare's "Troilus and Cressida", I will deconstruct the artist's studio within an institution as a paradoxical heterotopic space.

### **Background Information:**

William Shakespeare wrote “Troilus and Cressida” around the year 1602, at a time when humanism had taken hold of Europe and the use of Greek classics as a moral code for behavior was commonplace in art and literature. Ancient heroes and texts were meant to inspire the individual to transcendence by example: integrity from Hector, courage from Achilles, wisdom from Ulysses, etc.

What Shakespeare does in “Troilus and Cressida” is apply a critical, almost empirical lens to the actions of these noble heroes in order to relate them to the lives and events of common people—his audiences. “Troilus and Cressida” systematically strips these mythic heroes of their moral dimension by incessantly questioning the intrinsic values of hierarchy, honor, and love.

The play is built on two essential plots: a love plot taken from Geoffrey Chaucer’s poem “Troilus and Criseyde” written in the mid 1380’s and a military plot of the Trojan war, derived from a 1598 translation of Homer’s “Iliad” by George Chapman, an English dramatist, translator, poet, and contemporary of Shakespeare’s. In his adaptation of both of these plots, Shakespeare is equally cynical—“Troilus and Cressida” is anti-romance and anti-epic.

“Troilus and Cressida” is a play about debate. The style of the play made it hard to watch. It stutters, stops, and disappoints—it does not try to entertain. This made it one of Shakespeare’s least popular plays and it was rarely performed on stage until the early 20th century. “Troilus and Cressida” has gained relevance and popularity during times of war, particularly during WWI, when its dominant theme, decay of morality, had a particular resonance with the public.

## **Introduction:**

On April 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> 2012, I staged an adaptation of “Troilus and Cressida” in my studio on the third floor of the art building at Virginia Commonwealth University. Both performers and observers were a selected group based on specific personal and institutional relationships. The point of doing this was to conflate and confuse my personal narrative and the strategies of my art practice with a play that I see as using similar strategies in its treatment of characters.

My interest is to understand if and how a performance such as this one might magnify the studio as what Michel Foucault calls a “heterotopia”—a place of otherness that exists in a kind of “non-geography” (Foucault).

In this thesis I will examine the notion of the artist’s studio within an institution as a paradoxical heterotopic space. The paper will be structured in three parts:

- 1) A description of the specifics of the adaptation of the Shakespeare play “Troilus and Cressida” into a performance held in my studio.
- 2) A comparison of the theatre and the studio.
- 3) A discussion of how the concept of the 4<sup>th</sup> wall might transfer/apply to the artist’s studio as a heterotopic space.

## **Performance:**

There were two nights of the performance. The first had no audience and the second was attended by an invited group of students, my committee, other professors, and friends. In my email to the invited guests I wrote:

“All of you have been an important and valuable part of my experience at VCU both as a student and as an artist. All of you have spent time in this studio so it seems appropriate that this is where the performance should take place...like a continuation of the critical discourse that has occurred here up to this point.”

The guests were given a time and place—8pm-9pm, Vlad’s studio, a title “Troilus and Cressida”—and were told that they were free to come and go as they pleased throughout the performance. They had limited to no knowledge about the nature of what they would see or experience other than the varying extents to which they knew my studio practice.

The guests entered into a performance that was in progress; having been deliberately started at 7:45pm. Upon entering the space, two things were immediately apparent:

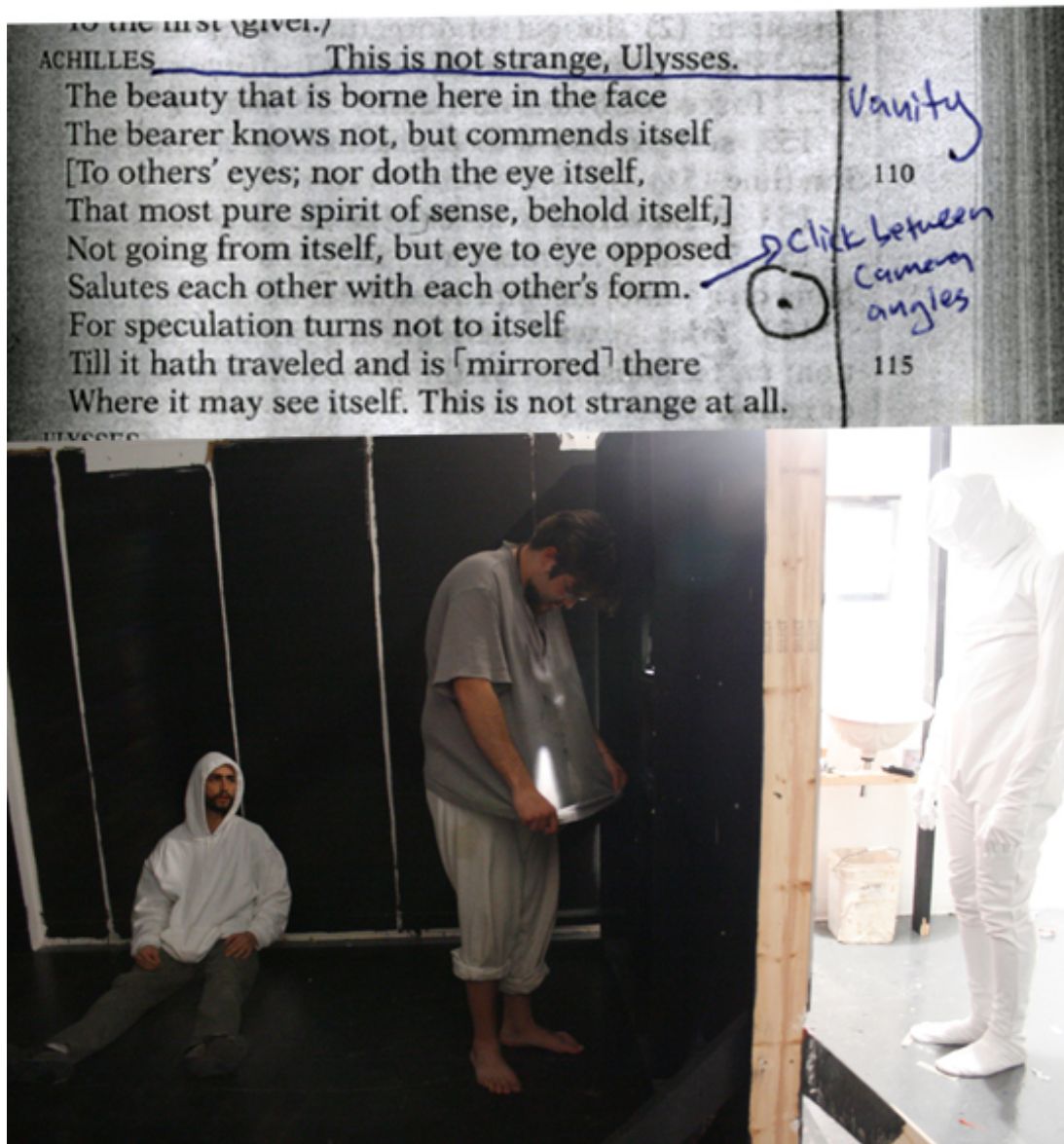
1) It was clear that the studio had become a stage and the set on this stage had been made out of reconstituted material from previous art works I had made.

2) There were four people in the room. To the left, someone was wearing a white hoodie and juggling oranges, another person was pacing around and reciting Shakespearian verse, a man was in the far corner of the room playing the double bass, and there was a figure in a full body white latex suit standing perfectly still near the center of the room. The man juggling was recognizable as Reid, a fellow grad student who everybody knew. The man in the suit was presumed to be me and the other two were not known to the audience.



I have labeled the four characters in the performance as: the alien, the artist, the ghost, and the juggler. For me, these four characters were a kind of deconstruction of how I might locate and understand the position of the artist within the physical/psychological matrix of the studio.

They were meant to be different sides of the same person, defining and redefining each other as the performance went on. My vision of the fractured persona of the artist came out of one of the central dialogues in "Troilus and Cressida" in which Achilles explains to Ulysses that you cannot see or know yourself but through your own reflection in others eyes:





## The Artist:

The artist is an actor speaking a selection of lines from “Troilus and Cressida” that were written down on two legal pads.

I made the artist an actor because within a heterotopic space the line between being ones self and acting out one’s self gets blurred and identity gets stretched. I see my portrayal of the artist almost as a mannerist interpretation, approaching a deeper sense of the “artist” cliché by isolating and exaggerating the quality of introversion. The artist was the only one in the room who spoke and as such, was forced into being a kind of master of ceremonies. He was meant to be dysfunctional in this role—talking in circles, using different accents, intonations, and tones, and mostly being unaware and unresponsive to his environment.

I wanted my adaptation of the play to weave in and out of different levels of self-awareness—shifting between being the play, a rehearsal for the play, and an address to the play. My version of “Troilus and Cressida” both knows and doesn’t know itself—sometimes being capable of critical distance and other times being trapped in a closed dialogue; sometimes having clarity and sometimes going on like an absurd Dadaist performance.

The Artist most closely resembles the “Troilus and Cressida” character of Thersites—servant to Achilles and the play’s unforgiving commentator. With Thersites, Shakespeare takes the conventional character of the satirist and strips him of any pretensions of being a moral healer. Thersites is a slave to his extroversion, constantly insulting, judging, and criticizing the supposed heroes of the play. In my adaptation, the guests cannot escape the artist’s introverted rants.





The Alien:

“The heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible.”

– Foucault, Of Other Spaces, Heterotopias

For me, this *incompatibility* of sites in a heterotopia has a strong correlation to Julia Kristeva's concept of the abject, which she defines as our reaction to a threatened breakdown in meaning caused by the loss of the distinction between subject and object or between self and other.

The Alien is a heterotopia embodied by a figure—a “self” getting into a suit and becoming an “other”—a non-entity. I wore the white plastic suit and remained as still as I could in a straight and solemn stance for the entirety of the performance. The only visible movement was the inflation of the head of the garment as I breathed out and breathed my own breath back in. In art terms this was a performance about endurance and physical limits. On a personal level the forced difficulty of my breathing was a meditation on suffering.

The Alien mourns the death of the man who put on the suit and meditates on the abject through self-inflicted suffering, blindness, and immobility. Breathing is simultaneously a physical, psychological, and instinctual act that is closely linked to life and death. The Alien's lungs were like a pendulum moving back and forth between self and other. At times, the Artist would roll up a cigarette and blow smoke in the face of the Alien to emphasize the strain on the lungs. The Alien's role was to induce a faux suffering that within a degree of difference could become real suffering.

In general terms, the point of all this was to demonstrate that the difference between being in control and out of control, absurd and abject, dead and alive is a matter of degree. The Alien illustrated the main speech of the play as spoken by Ulysses in Act 1, Scene 3, an excerpt of which I have provided below:

Ulysses:  
O, when degree is shaken,  
Which is the ladder to all high designs,  
The enterprise is sick! How could communities,  
Degrees in schools and brotherhoods in cities,  
Peaceful commerce from dividable shores,  
The primogenitive and due of birth,  
Prerogative of age, crowns, sceptres, laurels,  
But by degree, stand in authentic place?  
Take but degree away, untune that string,  
And, hark, what discord follows! each thing meets  
In mere oppugnancy: the bounded waters  
Should lift their bosoms higher than the shores  
And make a sop of all this solid globe:  
Strength should be lord of imbecility,  
And the rude son should strike his father dead:

Force should be right; or rather, right and wrong,  
Between whose endless jar justice resides,  
Should lose their names, and so should justice too.  
Then every thing includes itself in power,  
Power into will, will into appetite;  
And appetite, an universal wolf,  
So doubly seconded with will and power,  
Must make performe an universal prey,  
And last eat up himself.

The essence of this quote is that reason and judgment cannot be separated from appetite and will. Moral and social order come out of debate and discourse rather than a predetermined value system. The focus on my breath was a metaphor for the fragile balance between right and wrong.



Blind Fear  
That Seeing Reason  
leads  
Finds Safer footing  
Than Blind Reason

Stumbling  
Without Fear.  
To fear the worst  
oft causes the worst

## The Ghost:

The musician in my performance was playing the role of the Ghost. He composed and performed a score that lasted approximately one hour and came in three major waves or acts. The sound he produced was meant to bounce between the room and the audience, melting into Shakespeare's text—an ebb and flow between present and past.

Incorporating the double bass made sense both on a historical level (becoming a prominent solo instrument in the 17<sup>th</sup> century) and also in its capacity to redefine itself. From the time of its inception, the double bass has been the backbone of western classical music, folk music, blues, bluegrass, country, tango, rockabilly, rock and roll, and contemporary classical music. Not unlike "Troilus and Cressida" this instrument has been hard to define using one genre.

There is no such thing as a haunted house without a ghost and there is no such thing as a studio without an artist. The composition of the score was also ghost-like in that it slowly and compulsively revisited where it had already been throughout the performance. The music was like a haunting agent, floating around with no memory, recycling itself throughout the performance.

The double bass player was visible but separated from the rest of the action, placed in the corner of the room on a small rug. The formal qualities of the double bass balanced on the rug were a subtle allusion to a piece I had made in my studio the previous year titled "Golem." Many of the guests had seen this piece in several different manifestations in the same space. The notion of psychological residue between artworks is a running theme in my work; with individual artworks simultaneously proclaiming themselves as autonomous and behaving as orphaned phrases pleading to be reintegrated back into the artistic process.



The Juggler:

“ Heterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable. In general, the heterotopic site is not freely accessible like a public space...To get in one must have a certain permission and make certain gestures”

– Foucault, *Of Other Spaces, Heterotopias*

The juggler exposes the paradoxical nature of a heterotopia within an institution. If a heterotopia is at least in part meant to be an escape from the repression of institutions what does it mean when an institution creates or gives permission to a heterotopia? The Juggler in my performance is a symbol of the negotiation between the two.

I believe that there is a willful misinterpretation that needs to occur when it comes to what is actually happening in a studio within an art school and what is perceived to be happening. There has to be a guise—where one thing distracts from or hides the existence of another.

To speak in less abstract terms, the Juggler, as presented in my studio during the performance of “Troilus and Cressida” was juggling oranges, dropping them, picking them up and juggling again, making alcoholic drinks with the oranges, playing with the peels of the oranges in his mouth, etc. for one hour. I see his performance as a kind of mannerist institutional critique in which the surface level of his actions is rather insubstantial—drinking alcohol and clowning around on school premises. Through the juggler’s insistence on serving the guests alcohol, the clash between the performance and the institution was highlighted.

The difference between this kind of “playing at” institutional critique and a potentially serious situation in which an irresponsible student takes an art performance in his studio too far while a group of friends and professors watch and drink screwdrivers on a Saturday night, is a matter of degree.

My point in saying this is to understand what Foucault means by “certain permission” and “certain gestures” being necessary to get in to a heterotopic site. What I take it to mean is that we as artists are part of a club that is apart from the institution. The entry to that club is based on invitation and has to do with an embedded code based on a level of trust. We believe that the artist can get close to the abject and come back to tell about it. Every artist is a juggler when it comes to being in an institution. For a professor in my performance I imagine they were juggling their institutional role, artist role, critical role, and mentor role.

## Theatre/School:

With this thesis I want to conflate the institution of the theatre with the institution of the school. In Shakespeare's time, the theatre was an alternative classroom for those who could not get a conventional education. It was a place to sharpen one's knowledge of rhetoric and history through entertainment and participation. The theatre was also a place where people could measure themselves against the great figures of western history. The artist's studio has also always been about this kind of dialogue with the dead.



I believe that both the theatre and the school are places of interrupted and choreographed private moments. A Dan Graham pavilion might be a good metaphor for this—being transparent and reflective at the same time—watching yourself and watching other people watching you—your private moments being reflected onto others. Like Graham, I am interested in operating in between forms—or more accurately, slipping in and out of forms. “Troilus and Cressida” is a good analog for me in this way because it is so hard to characterize generically, being at once comedy, tragedy, history, and satire.

### The 4<sup>th</sup> wall:

“Heterotopias are most often linked to slices in time...a heterotopia begins to function at full capacity when men arrive at a sort of absolute break with their traditional time”

– Foucault, *Of Other Spaces, Heterotopias*

The 4<sup>th</sup> wall is the invisible layer between the audience and the stage in traditional theatre that allows you to enter or believe in the world of the play. When the 4<sup>th</sup> wall is invisible, the audience is a voyeur onto the action of the play. Modern theatre began to experiment by showing or breaking the 4<sup>th</sup> wall and addressing the audience directly in various ways.

Another reason I have used “Troilus and Cressida” as the skeleton of my performance is that it is deceptive in its use of the 4<sup>th</sup> wall. While the plot of the play (which I believe is intentionally insignificant) moves forward in what seems like a traditional way, the characters seem to have a self awareness of themselves as characters. They know that the words they are saying were put in their mouth for some larger purpose that they are not allowed to know. They are like avatars whose bodies carry a soul from a different time and place.

In my studio, what were the guest’s expectations in terms of the 4<sup>th</sup> wall? Who/what were they supposed to be? I would think that they wanted to be an audience—not to participate in a physical way—to be a voyeur. Most people wanted to pretend there was a separation between audience and performers. My aim was to acknowledge visitors at a glance, to never fully locate them as an audience.

Part of what I was doing was creating a tension by placing them on a stage, occupying the same space as the four characters. I put people in a position to have to choose their manner of participation, which is another way of saying that I wanted to put them in the position of the artist. If everyone in the art studio embodies the position of the artist, a heterotopic situation can occur.

Another expectation people probably had before entering the studio was an overlay of critical theory on top of what they would see—something to decipher or add to. I tried to meet this expectation half way. Just as the music filled the room and defined the walls, the guests were lining the walls, in an attempt to become an audience and establish the fourth wall. There was no 4<sup>th</sup> wall because there was no audience.





### Conclusion:

This analysis of the performance in my studio at VCU has been leading towards a major question that I leave grad school with: What happens when two heterotopias overlap, in my case the theatre and the artist's studio?

I believe that overlapping heterotopias induces a breakdown or collapse in meaning that approaches the abject and expands the parameters of our existence.

In her essay, "The Powers of Horror", Julia Kristeva discusses art as a means to purify the abject:

The various means of *purifying* the abject—the various catharses—make up the history of religions, and end up with that catharsis par excellence called art, both on the far and near side of religion. Seen from that standpoint, the artistic experience, which is rooted in the abject it utters and by the same token purifies, appears as the essential component of religiosity. That is perhaps why it is destined to survive the collapse of the historical forms of religions. (The Powers of Horror, 17)

The only “real” experience I can speak for with regard to the performance is my own which I will try to describe here:

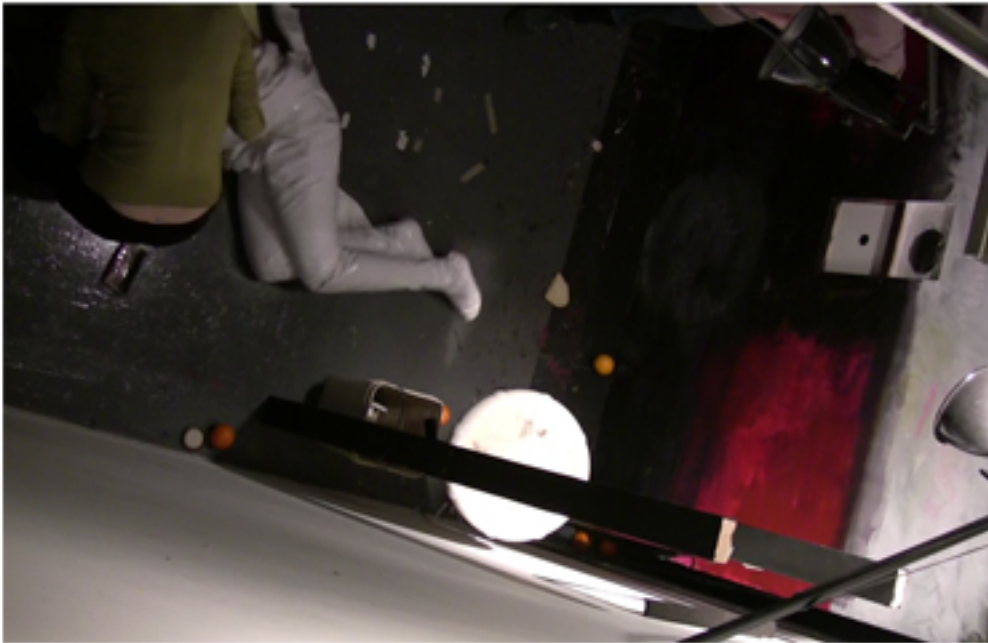
I put on a full body white latex suit fifteen minutes before anyone came in my studio. In this suit I could not see. I had access to oxygen entering through the spaces in the zipper at the back of my head. Controlled breath was essential because everything I took in was immediately coming back out and inflating the mask in front of me. My breath was hot in front of me. The idea of death crossed my mind two times. Two people close to me had recently died and I thought of them. I focused on the text of “Troilus and Cressida” to measure my breathing and on the music for my posture. After about fifteen minutes of a trance like stability I felt myself shifting into a less focused place—the words began to melt together and the music went away. At that point I tried to shift my focus to what I saw, which was a dull yellow haze that at times was interrupted by a shadow moving across. One time something touched my right leg. As more people entered the room, it became increasingly difficult to access oxygen and this created a bigger strain on my lungs and my composure. At this time, about halfway through the performance, a dull heavy pressure began to accumulate in my forehead and sweat was rolling down my face and stinging my eyes. Soon I became distracted by the sound of my heart getting faster and louder in my body. I wasn’t going to break character, which meant that I had to remain calm in this situation or else my lungs would start to convulse. Focusing again on my breath made it easier to stand still—my body felt limp about 45 minutes in except for the repetitive rising and falling of my shoulders. I began to feel tears swelling up in my eyes like my body responding to the fact that it knew I wasn’t going to stop. This kind of detachment of body and mind became something to reflect on which I did for as long as I could. I could feel that the performance was going over an hour because I had surpassed the point I reached when I had done it without guests the night before. I was much colder now and I knew that I had gone as far as I could. The other performers and I had worked out a signal, which meant that I wanted everyone out of the studio immediately. I gave the signal. Reid quickly told everyone to leave and the performance was over.

“No, as in true theater, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being.”

Kristeva, “The Powers of Horror”, page 3



El Greco, "Pieta", 1587-1597



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