



Curatorial Essay

Cultural Transference

June 15 – July 28, 2012

CULTURAL TRANSFERENCE is an exhibition concerned with the ways in which art changes how culture is understood. Culture is a broad term, and so it is worth defining to delineate what may at first appear to be an unruly theme for an exhibition. In the broadest sense, culture is defined as "the behaviors and beliefs characteristic of a particular social, ethnic, or age group." And yet, in the context of the high arts, culture is also a term used to describe

"development or improvement of the mind," as well as "that which is excellent in the arts, manners, etc." As I write this, it's clear that culture is an inclusive term, for it also describes the biological, emphasizing the cultivation of microorganisms and the raising of living things -- animals and plants -- with an eye towards improvement.¹ For the purpose of the exhibition, culture can be framed as more of an anthropological condition, "the sum total of ways of living built up by a group of human beings and transmitted from one generation to another." For me personally, culture has always been wrapped up in very flexible religious and spiritual associations, layered with a combination of national identities that are more or less relevant depending on the context. The point of the exhibition is not to out myself, or you as the viewer, but to consider how the instabilities of cultural production can be a constructive force in society, one that allows for multiple readings of cultural references, paving the way for new cultural forms.

Within the exhibition, several artists - Nicolas Dumit Estevez, Pablo Helguera, and Juliana Irene Smith - have engaged in their own process of becoming. In some cases, it is difficult to separate whether these transformations are purely artistic or personal, fantastic or real, but they make sense as art that is descriptive of actual human conditions. Nicolas Dumit Estevez's project is the most local to New York City, specifically the Bronx, where he has lived for the past seven years. Last year, he developed a performative project entitled *Born Again: A Lebanese-Dominican Dominican York is Born Again as a Bronxite* (2011) that involved interviews with community members about their experiences in the Bronx, as well as a baptism. Here at EFA Project Space, the piece is represented by five photographs documenting his baptism using water from the Bronx River. Bringing together his identity as a performance artist and his relationship with the Bronx, Estevez's baptism involved blessings by long time Director of the Bronx Council on the Arts Bill Aguado and performance artist and founder of Franklin Furnace Martha Wilson, both of whom appear in the photographs.

Pablo Helguera's personal transformation is partially captured in the installation *Everything in Between*, (2007), a collection of the artist's drawings, sketchbooks and diaries from the years 1988 through 1992, which are the first years that follow his move from Mexico City to Chicago. The two tabletop vitrines in the gallery display artwork Helguera made in these early years in the United States, where he moved to attend art school. The piece also includes pages of the artist's diaries, which Helguera made into an audio recording.

Recent artwork by Juliana Irene Smith is greatly influenced by several years spent living in Ramallah, where she made and taught art. Capturing the impossibility of true belonging, her installation *He said he could not understand me. I repeated* (2011) is comprised of prints and collages from Mark Twain's 1867 book *The Innocents Abroad*, which has been used by the Zionists as part of their propaganda against the Palestinians. Smith uses Twain's book to help describe her own journey to the Holy Land, specifically to Ramallah, located in the West Bank, north of Jerusalem in Palestine, where she honed in on excerpts of text that provide an open-ended narrative for the photographs that she took there. "I am not proud" becomes a caption for the morning after a party, and "cramped legs and in a torturing misery...I prefer the American system" is a caption for a portrait of a pensive young woman staring off into the distance.

Like Smith's relationship to Palestinian culture, Umesh Maddanahalli's video *Black Towel* (2008) tells the story of being

¹ All definitions are from dictionary.com

outside of one's home country and culture. *Black Towel* is a twenty-minute excerpt of a film that Maddanahalli plans to make, in which we witness Bin, the protagonist, attempting to seduce Heidi at a bar in an unspecified town in Austria. As night blends into morning, cultural boundaries dissolve, yet Heidi is still unable to place Bin, continually asking *but where are you from?*

Blurring a range of cultural references, Shinique Smith, LoVid, and Firelei Baez work with visual material that is filtered through new and old technologies, resulting in varying degrees of abstraction. Smith's hanging bundle sculpture entitled *Seascape* (2012) compresses textiles - fabric and cushions - into an amalgam of plaid, chenille, black and white stripes, floral prints, and a tropical seascape, emphasized by a dangling yellow-green fringe reminiscent of a palm frond. Each of these objects suggests previous use and is embedded with meaning, yet together their differences are synthesized through an abstract composition. Using newer technologies, LoVid's *Freedom Confined* (2008) is a video object containing a handmade synthesizer that generates a live video, encased in a wood and resin frame. LoVid's Tali Hinkis and Kyle Lapidus describe the piece as a combination of two forms of craft: highly gestured sculpture and engineering. While this form of technology does not distribute narrativistic information, LoVid's practice reflects on the way in which new media has facilitated the movement of culture through the airwaves. The movement of the video's abstract patterns at certain moments bears a resemblance to ikat textile patterns, which are produced using a resist dye process that is seen in many ethnic fabrics. The abstract design pulsates rhythmically, a timekeeper of sorts that helps set the tempo for Firelei Baez's dancing figures. Baez's *Prescribed Seduction* (2012) is an ongoing series of video stills with hand drawn details printed and collaged onto the pages of books de-accessioned from the Cooper Union's engineering library. The series brings together disparate technological matter: books, video stills, and decorative patterns of the Middle East and Latin America. The figures on the book pages are video stills of women doing Jamaican dances like 'duttu wine', sourced from youtube. In a close reading, it is possible to find floral patterns signifying British influence, and Alhambra patterns filling the women's silhouettes, making reference to the Middle Eastern, specifically Lebanese, lineages that have found their way to the Caribbean and other parts of Latin America.

Allusions to colonial beginnings extend through American and European culture. Drawing from the aesthetics of folk tradition, Allison Smith and Matthew Cowan, from the United States and New Zealand respectively, have mined the cultural mores of the regions where they have lived and worked. Smith's performative sculptures and objects have been props for historical reenactments, and accumulate a sense of magic when viewed in a gallery setting. Imbued with a similar aura, twelve of her *Untitled (Pitcher Collection)* (2011) were selected from more than three hundred works on paper that depict quotidian household objects, some decorative and others functional. The objects featured in these collages have been isolated and positioned in such a way that some of them take on anthropomorphic, magical qualities. Matthew Cowan's performative practice verges on a more interpretive reenactment of folkloric traditions. Cowan's two artworks presented in the exhibition mark beginning-and-end rituals typical of Mummers, whose heavily disguised rituals and traditions have carried on since the 16th century, in both England and Philadelphia. *I'll Sweep Your House* (2008/2012) is the artist's collection of Mummers' brooms which would typically be used to demarcate a circular area that becomes the stage for a performance. *Tying the Knot* (2012) refers to the ending of a Mummers' play in which the actors make a star out of their swords, although the swords would not necessarily be actual swords, but could be represented by tools of labor local to the region where the performance takes place.

Two artists whose projects consider the conditions of labor in a global context are Elisabeth Smolarz and Christopher K. Ho. The economies of labor are especially relevant to the idea of cultural transference as money can be an empowering factor in how culture moves through the world. Elisabeth Smolarz's *The One Hundred Dollar Project* (2006-2012) compares the economic value of \$100 in each of the G8 + 5 countries. In each place, Smolarz asked local residents "how many people can be hired with \$100, for one hour, and what work will they do during that hour?" In most of the European countries, generally three people would agree to share the amount, whereas in India thirty-six people showed up to participate and share the \$100. The artist's intention in surveying these countries in this way was to visualize the discrepancies between economic conditions on a global scale. Accompanying the videos are color-coded shapes that reveal a comparative assessment of each country's share of the world's population, share of the world's wealth, and their 2011 account balance. Also reflecting on comparative economies, Christopher K. Ho's *China #2* (2008) is a project that began in Mexico City, where he applied onto shipping containers reflective vinyl texts in Chinese that read, "Made in Mexico" and "Created in Mexico." The idea for the original installation was to highlight the discrepancy between the value of labor-based production (i.e. "made in Mexico") versus invention-based production ("created in Mexico"). The piece also questions the relationship between two of the largest ascending trading partners with the United States and confuses their status relationship to one another in the translation of "Made" and "Created in Mexico" into Chinese. Does this mean that China is outsourcing its production to Mexico?

Mostly made in Japan, Hello Kitty™ products are a commodity that has helped the world feel more connected to Japan, albeit superficially. Yoko Inoue's *The Seven Transformations of Hello Kitty and the Black Mirror* is part of a long-term project in which she is investigating the relationships between Japanese sub, pop and political culture through creating hybridized

objects. *The Seven Transformations of Hello Kitty* features masks that Inoue has made by hand, transforming our familiar cat into drag kitty with a long beard, a fur faced character with long hair extensions, and a punk kitty with massive chain earrings. Recently exhibited as part of a subversive marketplace at Smack Mellon in Brooklyn, Inoue's ceramic work depicting the faces of Hello Kitty provides a chance to reconsider the cultural significance of designer Yuku Shimizu's creation of the character who was the alter ego of Kitty White, a fictional character from the suburbs of London. Sanrio, the company that produces Hello Kitty and other Japanese cute culture products, and Shimizu decided to make Hello Kitty British because when she was created, foreign countries were popular in Japan.

Hubert Czerepok's two projects presented in the exhibition, *Everything is Darkness* (2006/2012) and *Reaching the Stars* (2011) both reflect on Polish culture historically and in the present moment. The LED installation *Everything is Darkness* continually switches between what resembles a Christmas holiday star and a Jewish star, highlighting the possibility for these two symbols to morph, and for these cultures to coexist. *Reaching the Stars* is a documentary film about the first Polish space program which is currently being revived without public awareness of the program's precedent. Both stars serve as reminders of cultural amnesia which is often orchestrated on the political level, as well as the illusive reach for an empowered national identity. Also dealing with political symbols, Dread Scott and Kyle Goen's *United We Stand Stand* (2012) was staged this spring as a performative intervention in Times Square where they sold t-shirts with the flags of the Middle Eastern countries accompanied by the text "United We Stand." Scott and Goen attempted to hawk the shirts from a makeshift booth as a public provocation, to reconsider our collective relationship to patriotism, and the logic behind the war on terror. The project calls for unity with these countries with which the US is at war, proposing a more humanistic attitude towards the global community, instead of harboring petty capitalistic interests.

Altogether, the artists give us food for thought about how culture can be shared, more inclusive, and better understood. Some have worked to reconsider culture as cultural tradition, whether through ethnographic study of a culture, or on a more internal, individualized basis, while others have taken stock of the role economics play in the transmission of culture and eventually its transformation. Still other projects give us the sense that humanity should win out over exclusionary politics.

Heidi is still wondering where Bin is from.

- Sara Reisman, 2012

Sara Reisman is Director of New York City's Percent for Art program, which commissions permanent artworks for City-owned public spaces. She has organized exhibitions and written about public engagement and public art, social practice, the aesthetics of globalization, and site-specificity for the Philadelphia Institute of Contemporary Art, Queens Museum of Art, The Cooper Union School of Art, Smack Mellon, The Bronx Museum of Art, Socrates Sculpture Park, Momenta Art, Aljira, the Kunsthalle Exnergasse, and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Banjaluka, Republic of Srpska, among others. Reisman was the 2011 Critic-in-Residence at Art Omi, an international visual artist residency in upstate New York, an experience which served as inspiration for this exhibition.

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Front image: **Nicolas Dumit Estevez**, from *Born Again: A Lebanese-Dominican Dominican York is born again as a Bronxite*, series of five digital C prints, 2011

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