ARE THOSE REAL POEMS OR DID YOU WRITE THEM YOURSELF?

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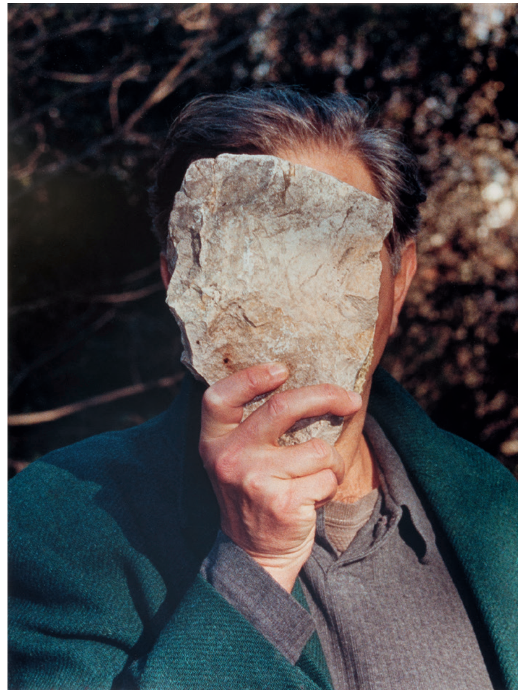
The question posed in the title – something Jimmie Durham once overheard – represents a musing on self and real that indicates the levels of removal and ambiguity that art is all about. Art is never simply what it appears to be. It doesn't have singular meanings. It doesn't show itself directly. Regarding art with an assumption of literal meaning can in fact yield the misconceptions or culture-clashes that mark America's recent debates around cultural appropriation. What Jimmie Durham overheard is not necessarily something he agrees with. Or can he say what he believes only through the double removal of quoting a question he overheard? Artworks are mysterious but also personal, and in that sense highly specialized. What artists reveal as art and artistic context is often equivalent to what they have concealed. Art depends on this double movement. When art is exhibited, however, it becomes public and historical, and is scrutinized for meaning; this is where the trouble begins.

Now art is all about being constructed out of relationships between parts.
– Laura Owens

If we take what Laura Owens intended to be a comment on the formal, material process of art-making today and read it as a social, cultural, and political description, we find another key to recent American debates over cultural appropriation. During the late 1970s and '80s artists introduced formalist, material appropriation as a critical and transformative tool; this moment also happened to be the dawn of neoliberalism and identity politics. Today all three are *in extremis*: Digitally-enhanced neoliberalism is reaching its cruel limits, a new and reactionary kind of identity politics has taken shape, and appropriation in art now primarily implies cultural appropriation. I want to consider some of the ways these three historical figures are intertwined.

In the art context the term appropriation has traditionally referred to an empowering critical tool involving the guerrilla displacement of objects and images. Durham emerged on the contemporary art scene during the rise of identity politics and appropriation. In the late 1970s and early 80s artists established the now ubiquitous gesture of borrowing, taking, or copying with an aim to fragment and dislocate, in order to emphasize how context makes meaning. Appropriation interfered with dominant representations, challenging the power structures implicit in images and objects from not only art history but also the commercial and popular material of what the Frankfurt School called "culture industry". Appropriation was a theft from power.

Decades later the implication of artistic appropriation has been turned on its head, and the presumed theft from power has turned into a presumed theft from the oppressed. According to Merriam Webster, appropriation means unlawfully taking from a rightful owner "under the guise of authority", a phrase which may be taken as a pointed euphemism for the injustices of colonialism, racism, and patriarchy. In this sense, appropriation is a red thread going through the entire history of dispossession, oppression, and marginalization. Current outrage is aimed at the naiveté with which (white) artists are taking images from other cultures or peoples. This is the context that produced the recent debacle around Durham's retrospective. Instead of focusing on the artist's position and influence on contemporary art over the last four decades, the conversation shifted to his identity and how to locate it relative to Cherokee culture; whether his work exploited Cherokee culture; whether he occupied space Cherokees needed for their own representation.



Self-Portrait Pretending to Be a Stone Statue of Myself *(2006) by Jimmie Durham*

But culture is relational, not solely a history of domination, and its most interesting creative achievements occur in a liminal space of overlap and difference. The necessary ambiguity in every artwork is met by the broad public's need for clarity and understanding. As a defense mechanism, artists often shroud themselves and their art in elements of doubt and artificiality. Durham's 2006 series of photographic self-portraits could be a response to those critics who label him a racial imposter. Here, in a playful exploration of identity, he becomes the trickster he is accused of embodying. Unless, in a sly way, he is only pretending to be the trickster.

Alighiero Boetti and Joseph Beuys already employed this ambiguity at a time when mass media had just begun to consider art and, in turn, to be considered by art. Boetti cultivated the assumption that contemporary art depends on this dialectic of reveal/conceal, by reaching back to older and more mystical traditions. *Shaman–Showman* is the title of a 1968 photomontage, in which Boetti added his own face to an image appropriated from Eliphas Lévi's *History of Magic* that depicts the body of primal man emerging from the divine waters of Creation fully entwined with his own reflection, onto which he is gently blowing. In another gesture from around the same time, the artist mailed fifty postcards to friends and acquaintances, each showing two Boettis walking hand in hand like twin brothers, defining and simultaneously nullifying a fictitious symmetry, in an opposition that is not transcended but transformed (*Twins*, 1968). In 1972 Boetti inserted an *e* between his Christian and family names, declaring that henceforth he was to be known as Alighiero e Boetti, indicating that within the self lay a multiplicity; marking distinction and difference as well as reciprocity, conjunction, and interdependence; an additive plus-one as well as a division: all the paradoxes at the very heart of the artist.

Shaman Showman *(1968) by Alighiero e Boetti*

Beuys famously mythologized his World War II plane crash and subsequent rescue by Tartars who supposedly nursed him to health with honey, fat, and felt. The tale was declared a manipulative lie by Benjamin Buchloh, but is it not rather a founding myth, which must necessarily shift between truth and fiction? Beuys was speaking of personal trauma, which meant to also invent it in order to be able to overcome it, and all this in turn generated crucial elements for his art. He went on to directly engage the public's suspicion that artists might indeed be charlatans and that art itself was mere illusionism. For him, this leap into self-affirmation is achieved through masking. To appear in the hat and vest he wore at all times was both reassurance and negation, an "over-coming" of the self through uniform. This led to a double-edged self-revelation and self-exposure that never resolved, lingering somewhere between charlatanry and shamanism. It is a hope that also contains a doubt, even a latent cynicism, which denies the artist any possibility of sincerity, and thus any real relevance. Beuys, in this moment of self-deconstruction, makes manifest and takes up the challenge every artist must face: how to play the role of artist, which is to say, how to make work that differentiates itself from daily life while still relating to the social and cultural conditions in which it exists. Beuys makes a leap of faith with his complex masking and doubled identity, not by ending doubt, but manifesting it. This gesture represents not simply encouragement and approval but also the confidence game, transcendence, defeat, and triumph. Ultimately it must be seen as much a form of "care of the self" as it is a benefit to all art. In ways like this, artists anticipate the public gaze by constructing a persona somewhere between truth and fable, a persona marked by a playful skepticism toward the publicness of their personal references, desires and dis/beliefs. As Edouard Glissant urged: "Consent not to be a single being!"[1]

This is, of course, delicate; Homi Bhabha has suggested that "we can never quite control these acts [of what is currently called cultural appropriation] and their signification. They exceed intention."[2] Complicating matters is the fact that the museum is often the primary interface between a public and all of these unstable artistic gestures and unreliable personae. Museums have come to compete within a free-market logic in which they reach for endowments as well as daily visitor numbers in the thousands, and this distracts them from the particular care required by art. Everyone grasps that a museum exists to unite different parts within a master narrative, a narrative synonymous with cultural power, and perhaps it is partly this hegemonic cut and paste – an apparent appropriation – that foregrounds that which exceeds the artists' intentions, leading to recent difficulties we have seen with works by Sam Durant, Kelley Walker, Dana Schutz, and others.

Both appropriation art and much of post-colonial thinking emerged some 40 years ago from the moment of post-structuralism, with its anti-essentialism and pursuit of coded hierarchies and fixed meanings. In this light, there is a shared history between identity politics and appropriation. If initially identity politics was about forming a community to achieve visibility in demanding civil rights, today its more essentializing claims often seem to shore up existing structures of capital and power. Rather than breaking

down borders, discrimination, fear of others, and other forces of separation in order to demand equality, it can shut down dialogue and reward self-singularization. As Fred Moten observed, "individuation is the incarceration of difference."[3]

Friends tell me: Don't write about cultural appropriation, you'll get yourself into trouble. But why is it that we cannot now *be with the trouble*? Part of it may be traced to some of the issues highlighted by both early artistic appropriation and nascent identity politics: our age's anxiety around copy and original, and the corresponding importance of context. In the intervening years these issues have only sharpened. Neoliberal policies and new technologies have brought us to a state of digital liquidity where everything is endlessly duplicated, shared, disseminated, and decontextualized. Copying is the state of Western culture now, its dominant feature, reaching all areas of life, grounded in the contemporary omnipresence of networks. In social media we are all copied and reproduced. You could even say there is no longer such a thing as a copy, as Seth Price proposed in *Was ist Los?* (2003). But when there is no copy, what is an original? Thus the new digital anxiety: How to grasp and retain control over what is deeply you or yours and what, nevertheless, you possess only fleetingly – your culture, your image, your style, your habits and mannerisms, your history, your sorrows.

Culture has always been about belonging, through shared rituals and ways of remembering, often in relation to objects or communal gatherings. While this used to take place in person, technological development has largely pushed culture and belonging into the digital arena. Hito Steyerl argues that "the thing formerly called real life has already become deeply imaged."[4] For Steyerl, the artist's task now lies in finding different forms of circulation. In art, value has shifted unstoppably toward the many ways to recall, annotate, personalize, edit, authenticate, display, mark, transfer, and engage a work. We need to move information, manage it, parse it, organize it, and distribute it. As Laura Owens put it, referring to the incorporation of methods and images with prior uses, art is now constructed out of relationships between parts. Parts may be taken to refer to images; their reproduction methods; that which they communicate; their cultural reference points; the ways they signify differently to different people. Art points to a relationship between the stages that images, copies, and representations go through. Art engages the question of what images are made of, what state they are in. Today art necessarily traces, houses, or performs the disquieting shifts and instabilities within images or objects that haunt our daily life. In this sense, it's unrealistic to not appropriate: An artist *must* tackle appropriation if she wishes to deal with culture and how it works. Of course, cultural appropriation itself is in some ways simply a recirculation of images. So what kind of storytelling can adapt to the technological novelty and vastness of the database as archive, while remaining in touch with specific, localized sensibilities and the histories of particular images?

Art is a traffic in symbols and images, and it has never been politically or historically neutral. We should face the abyss revealed by art's traffic in symbols. We cannot, in Sarah Schulman's words, hide behind the smoke screen of escalation, as confusing and painful – or ostensibly distracting – as the chasm may be.

In conclusion I want to quote Zadie Smith: "I do not find discussions on appropriation and representation to be in any way trivial. […] The solution remains as it has always been: Get out (of the gallery) or go deeper in (to the argument)."[5]

[1] Glissant quoted by Fred Moten as title of his forthcoming trilogy, the first of which is *Black and Blur* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).
[2] Homi Bhabha (roundtable participant), *"Cultural Appropriation: A Roundtable,"* Artforum (summer 2017): 270.
[3] Fred Moten, *"Black and Blur: Fred Moten in Conversation with Arthur Jafa,"* (discussion) The Graduate Center, The City University of New York, Dec. 11, 2017.
[4] Hito Steyerl and Laura Poitras in Conversation, *"Techniques of the Observer,"* Artforum (May 2015): 338–341.
[5] Zadie Smith, *"Getting In and Out: Who Owns Black Pain?"* Harper's Magazine (July 2017), https://harpers.org/archive/2017/07/getting-in-and-out (accessed on Jan. 10, 2018).