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Bakhtin and the contemporary visual arts

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In her 1995 study *Bakhtin and the Visual Arts*, Deborah J. Haynes examines Bakhtin's theories specifically in relation to the field of visual arts. Focusing primarily on four of Bakhtin's early texts – "Toward a Philosophy of the Act," "Author and Hero Aesthetic Activity," "The Problem of Content, Material, and Form in Verbal Art," and "Art and Answerability" – Haynes' goal is to apply theories of aesthetics discussed by Bakhtin, which directly relate to the his belief in the interdependency between artistic activity and everyday life, to the practice of analyzing and interpreting works of art. As one of the key texts to relate Bakhtin's theories to the creative process of visual arts, Haynes' study is a point of departure for our own examination of contemporary visual arts practices through a Bakhtinian framework.

There are two important distinctions between Haynes' use of Bakhtin and our own that should be noted. First, Haynes limits her discussion to a series of early essays, with the explicit intention of avoiding the two major areas that "the majority of books and articles written about Bakhtin's ideas have dealt with," specifically "dialogue and carnival" (1995: 8). For our purposes the elimination of Bakhtin's concepts of the dialogic and the carnivalesque is to overlook the presence and vitality of these two concepts within contemporary art forms and practices. One of the key elements of contemporary art since modernity is an engagement with texts and utterances; this is even more prevalent within postmodernism – most prominently visible in feminist and postcolonial practices – in which the fixity and originality of ideas are questioned and fundamentally address the dialogic nature of visual culture particularly in our media saturated environments or contexts. In addition, the carnivalesque, and with it the conception of the grotesque body has become a means of questioning and subverting issues of cultural identity and sexual differentiation, particularly within the areas of performance and video art.

The second distinction is the use and discussion of artworks in relation to Bakhtinian theory. The main three objectives that Haynes outlines in *Bakhtin and the Visual Arts* are historical. Via her first objective, she attempts to "help scholars interested in Bakhtin's work develop a more complete picture of the range of questions he addressed" by her second objective, specifically, laying "out the premises of his theory of creativity" (1995: 17-18). Although these first two objectives are meant to contextualize her discussion, they in fact overshadow her third objective, which is an attempt to "show why Bakhtin's theory is significant for artists, art historians, and art theorists" (1995: 20). In other words, Haynes' use and discussion of art within this text therefore functions as a subsidiary element to the task of delineating an application of Bakhtin's theories to art. Our objectives in "Bakhtin and the Contemporary Visual Arts" are to examine in detail the manner in which artists manifest dialogic and/or carnivalesque concepts within their artistic practice and therefore demonstrate Bakhtin's theories through the production of works of art in which language "is transformed from the absolute dogma it had been within the narrow framework of a sealed-off and impermeable monoglossia into a working hypothesis for comprehending and expressing reality" (Bakhtin, 2004: 61). In other words, artworks open up visual language to a dialogic, and often carnivalesque play of meaning.

The Carnival of Contemporary Art

A list of contemporary artists whose work exhibit Bakhtinian qualities would be overtly extensive, particularly due to the increased focus on the body as a subject and vehicle for artistic production. Typically, the body used in contemporary art "is a body in the act of becoming…never finished, never completed," which is Bakhtin's description of the grotesque body (Bakhtin, 1984: 317). The body is often used in a manner that subverts, or overthrows the dominant order through a temporary suspension of social conventions and cultural norms. In the grotesque realism practiced in the carnivalesque "the bodily element is deeply positive. It is presented not in a private, egotistic form, severed from the other spheres of life, but as something universal, representing all people" (Bakhtin, 1984: 19).

An example of this is can be seen in James Luna's *The Artifact Piece* (1987), in which he presented himself as a specimen of the "dying Native" by lying half-naked, clothed only in a leather loincloth, in a display case within a museum setting, with artifacts from his life arrayed around him.[1] It is through his presentation of the "grotesque" body, one that universally represents all people in a positive light, that Luna temporarily overturns hierarchies by pointing out the base similarities of our bodily existences. He uses his body to "challenge the representation, authority, perspective, and visuality of Native peoples in museums" and in doing so holds up a "mirror for us to look into and question those received ideas" (McMaster, 2007: 70). Luna's living breathing body subverts the rules of the museum – conventions which encase and entomb cultural artifacts as static and fixed in a long dead past – and confronts spectators with the colonizing discourse that frames and structures their gazes. In *The Artifact Piece*, we can see Luna's use of his body as the nexus of the artwork, but his project also incorporates the spectator's body through the self-awareness caused when realizing his unexpected presence within the museum. At its most basic level, Luna's act can be seen as part of the carnival tradition – one that is paralleled by the Native tradition of the Trickster[2] – that Bakhtin notes, "does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators…. Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it" (Bakhtin, 1984: 7). Through the display of his real, *universal* body – in direct opposition to standard museological representations of the Native body – Luna eliminates the distinctions between viewer and the body as object and thereby implicates the body of the spectator in the construction of the artwork. In doing so he demonstrates Bakhtin's notion of the answerability of the individual, that the spectator "must become answerable through and through: all of his constituent moments must not only fit next to each other in the temporal sequence of his life, but must also interpenetrate each other in the unity of guilt and answerability" (Bakhtin, 1990a: 2).

Since the 1960s contemporary artists have made use of their bodies and the bodies of spectators as a means of making individuals answerable for the art that they consume as part of their lives. The body as a vehicle for artistic discourse becomes manifest within contemporary art in two major ways. The first is in the body of the artist(s) being presented within an artwork. Rebecca Belmore's performance installation *Wild* (2001) consisted of

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[1] Luna first performed *The Artifact Piece* at the San Diego Museum of Man in 1987.

[2] Gerald Vizenor describes the trickster as "androgynous, a comic healer and liberator… The trickster sign is communal, an erotic shimmer in oral traditions" (Vizenor, 1999: 89).

the artist disrobing and lying in a four-poster bed, which she covered with beaver pelts and long black human hair, in the Grange master bedroom for several hours each day over a span of five days. Belmore's performance was part of the exhibit "House Guests: The Grange 1817 to Today," which took place in The Grange in 2001 and included the artistic interventions of six other artists. The Grange is a historical house that initially served as the first home of the Art Gallery of Toronto – now known as the Art Gallery of Ontario – and is currently part of the AGO in Toronto and functions as a historical museum. Like Luna, whom Belmore cites as her mentor, she presents her body as part of the exhibit and implicates viewers as voyeurs in an unexpected tableau that is erotically charged by the presence of Belmore's nude body. There are strong parallels between the performance work of Luna and Belmore, both of who engage in a critical dialogue with the institution of the museum and the stereotypical manner in which Natives are represented by such institutions. Belmore responded to Luna's *The Artifact Piece* with her own performance outside the Thunder Bay Art Gallery called *Exhibit 671B* (1988). As Lee-Ann Martin states, Belmore's performance

> was a critical response to issues surrounding the exhibition 'The Spirit Sings: Artistic Traditions of Canada's First Peoples,' organized by the Glenbow Museum in conjunction with the 1988 Winter Olympics in Calgary. The exhibition presented historical objects borrowed from national and international ethnographic museums. The Lubicon Lake Indian Nation in northern Alberta generated support from Aboriginal artists and communities across the country for its widely publicized boycott of the exhibition, angrily condemning the non-Aboriginal organizers of the exhibition for perpetuating the romanticization of Aboriginal cultural history while denying the complex contemporary realities of Aboriginal communities. (Martin, 2005: 50)

Through the use of her body, Belmore draws upon traditional oral practices in Native cultures "where it is assumed that the listener has as much a part in the creation of the story as the teller. In this way, the listener also carries responsibility for the knowledge that is transmitted" (Anderson, 2004: 49). Accordingly, the spectator becomes answerable for what they see and for their participation in the construction of histories that function to elide, eroticize or misrepresent Natives.

The performance artist Andrea Fraser makes a similar connection between the eroticized body and art in *Untitled* (2003), a documentary video installation in which she has sex with an unidentified male American collector who paid approximately $20,000 to participate in this work; the "authenticity" of the event and its meaning as "art" is left up to the viewer to decide. In Fraser's video the material or grotesque body is the site of artistic activity, challenging traditional ideals of Modernist artistic production and modes of display by calling attention to the *never finished* and *never completed* contextual dialogue of art as both a commodity and a producer of sexist discourse on the "female" body. As Fraser states, *Untitled* "is about the art world, it's about the relations between artists and collectors, it's about what it means to be an artist and sell your work—sell what may be, what should be, a very intimate part of yourself, your desire, your fantasies, and to allow others to use you as a screen for their fantasies" (Fraser, 2004). By using her body as a means of subverting the dominant order, Fraser raises the question of how collectors, spectators and even artists are answerable for the ways in which they engage with art.

Through their explicit use of their bodies, both Belmore and Fraser interrogate the manner in which women are represented as erotic objects that are available to be consumed as art: both artists engage in a carnivalesque dialogue with the conventions of art, which functions to temporarily overturn the rules of artistic discourse.

The second major manifestation of the body as a form of artistic discourse is the body of the spectator or participant in the context of the artwork. This blurring between the artist or artwork and the spectator is the basis of Bakhtin's vision of the creative act. "The aesthetic *whole* is not something co-experienced," he states, "but something actively produced, both by the author and by the contemplator" (Bakhtin, 1990b: 67). In other words, an artwork is not something experienced or even co-experienced by the spectator, but is in fact actively produced or created through the dialogic relationship between the artist and viewer or contemplator, typically through the object of the artwork. Jannis Kounellis, for example, foregrounds this dialogic exchange between artwork and spectator in his artistic practice. In *Untitled* (1969), visitors to the Galleria L'Attico in Rome were confronted by the sounds and smells of twelve live horses, which ate, urinated and defecated within the space of the gallery, the contextual experience of which *is* the artwork. In another *Untitled* (1969) work, he presented a series of eight metal scales, each scale holding coffee grounds that aromatically infuse the space of the exhibition space; as Stephen Bann notes, Kounellis "ensures the fresh grounds are replaced regularly throughout the period of each exhibition" (2003: 95). Since the artwork itself fundamentally depends upon the bodily response of the viewer to the olfactory stimulus that the piece triggers – one that Bann even recalls when looking at documentation of the work – the *whole* aesthetic experience of Kounellis' project must be created by both viewer and artist (2003: 95). The body of the spectator, therefore, is manifest within the context of the artwork, which in turn is itself created in part through the body of the spectator.

This relationship between artist and viewer is an integral part of all works of art, however, increasingly it is this bodily dialogic that *is* the basis of the entire project. An extreme example of this manifestation of the spectator's body can be seen in performative works that involve the consumption of food. An example of this is Rirkrit Tiravanija's *Pad Thai* (1990), which celebrates the everyday ritual of preparing food and eating it; in this work he prepares pad thai and serves it to the audience, whose bodily presence as consumers of the food creates and completes the work.[3] Tiravanja's project utilizes the often scripted or pre-determined space of the gallery for his performances, which typically are not sites of food preparation. Another example is the London Ontario based artist Ron Benner, whose corn roasts are specifically staged outside of the confines of the art gallery, instead being presented within the unscripted context of the street, which functions to blur the "borderline between art and life" (Bakhtin, 1984: 317). As Debra J. Haynes states: "Bakhtin's definition of art and of the artistic act is based on the need for a value-related dimension to the work and on the fundamental answerability of art and life, of the artist to and in the world" (1995: 101). In this manner, Benner's act of preparing and serving corn to anybody who attends his event functions as a form of answerability, in which art is taken out of the confines of the gallery and brought into direct contact with the context of life.

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[3] Performed at the Paula Allen Gallery in New York in 1990.

This answerability of art and life is most prominent in Benner's *Maize Barbacoa* (2006), in which he acknowledges the shared and ongoing history of the corn plant in this performance installation, where he roasts corn and serves it to people lined up on a Toronto street.[4] One of the key components in a number of Ron Benner's installations is the eating of corn, which he has grown as part of his garden installations and then harvests and cooks for people as part of his performance; these corn roasts are highly carnivalesque, enacting a profound image of the grotesque body as all of the participants eat corn in a ritual reminiscent of folk culture carnival traditions based around the celebration of food and the harvest. This shared bodily experience highlights the *never finished, never completed* cyclical nature of the body that is always becoming. Through the shared act of eating spectators enact Bakhtin's notion of the "encounter of man with the world, which takes place inside the open, biting, rending, chewing mouth, is one of the most ancient, and most important objects of human thought and imagery. Here man tastes the world, introduces it into his body, makes it part of himself" (1984: 281). In this way the body of the spectator or participant becomes the site of artistic creation for Benner. Here we can witness the importance of the dialogic within Benner's art, specifically in terms of the relationship that is developed between artist and viewer or participant, whose interaction literally creates the artwork.

These two manifestations of the body can be seen as accompanying or dialoguing with each other: the presence of the artist's body eliciting the spectator to self-consciously and even actively include their own body within the context or environment of the artistic project. As Bakhtin states: "The events of the grotesque sphere are always developed on the boundary dividing one body form the other and, as it were, at their points of intersection" (1984: 322). The increased focus on the body as a subject and vehicle within contemporary art has served primarily as a means of questioning and challenging notions of fixity and originality, which were hallmarks of modernist art practices. In the work of artists like Benner or Rebecca Belmore, there is a definite shift that takes place between the bodies of the people within the project, allowing for an artistic experience that encourages dialogue. "Bakhtinian categories," Robert Stam tells us, "display an intrinsic identification with difference and alterity, a built-in affinity for the oppressed and the marginal" (Stam, 1992: 21) The manifestation of dialogic and/or carnivalesque concepts within contemporary artistic practices, specifically those that engage with the body, therefore represent an important area of discourse that Bakhtin's theories can help to develop.

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[4] Performed as part of *Pasts Re-framed* for Nuit Blanche, Toronto September 30, 2006 to October 1, 2006.

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