

Performing the Self: Authentic Constructions

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in association with: Organic Art Factory

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This paper will discuss our work in terms of a process of understanding identity through artistic mediums – in particular photography and performance – by looking at two long-term constructions, or as they are more commonly known, durational performances.¹ We'll only briefly consider the first project, *being: paul and kate*, (2005-2008), which focused on manipulating personal identity through the isolation and control of fundamental living variables. It utilized the scientific method as a foundation for setting up a system of living as a series of experiments, and focused on reduction as a way of achieving clarity.

We'll spend more time with the project we are currently involved in, the *New American Cowboy Project (NaCP)*. This project focuses more directly on building identity from the ground up. As opposed to using the scientific method, this new project examines the Cowboy Code as its foundational document. Though not a method per se, the Cowboy Code is used as a parameter for the construction that is Beau and Lily Sage.

Being: Paul and Kate was in many ways the exact opposite of the *NaCP*. Whereas the constructions Paul and Kate worked to reduce all superficial indicators of identity as a way of questioning our relationship to our own personal objects and signifiers, Beau and Lily use specifically loaded cultural symbols as a way of questioning our relationship to culture and national identity, specifically the idea of "American-ness." For example, as Beau and Lily, we have changed significantly the way in which we dress, and in this way we have changed only one of our previously controlled living variables. Yet this single, superficial change has produced a profound difference in our identity and our work, as well as in our perceptions of self and other's perceptions of and interactions with us.

¹ Our reasons for using the term construction should be clarified during the course of the paper.

In her paper, “Memory Once Removed: Indirect Memory and Transitive Autobiography in Chantal Akerman’s *D’Est*”, Alisa Lebow quotes from a monologue by the filmmaker:

“You must always write when you want to make film, although you know nothing of the film you want to make. Yet, you already know everything about it. But you don’t realize this... Only when confronted with the act of making will it reveal itself. Groping along sputtering in a state of blind and limping hesitation. Sometimes in a flash of self-evidence.”²

Even though we don’t work directly in film, we feel Akerman’s sentiments directly parallel our experience with the practice we’ve been involved in since we began working together full-time as a collective art entity in 2005. This practice is built around “constructions” – long-term durational performances where we create and inhabit particular personas as a way of examining questions about our own personal, political, and cultural identities.

Since May 2008, we’ve been working under the names Beauregard and Lily Mae Sage. Beau and Lily are a way for us to embody our roots as rural, Midwestern Americans by assuming the outward appearance of an American icon: the cowboy. Always requiring certain leaps of faith, this most recent project required us to begin working without any understanding of what we were doing – what our work had quite suddenly decided to become. We had to entirely rely upon an idea that we have the ability to create ourselves in the eyes of the world simply by surrounding ourselves – everything from what we eat to what we wear – with particular signifiers. This quintessentially American image – even in its most simple form, the cowboy hat – has strong associations for most everyone we have encountered. And we’ve found that by

² Alisa Lebow, “Memory Once Removed: Indirect Memory and Transitive Autobiography in Chantal Akerman’s *D’Est*,” *Camera Obscura* 52, Volume 18, Number 1 (2003): 42.

wearing western-style clothing, we are constantly reminded of what our work is about – in fact, in many ways putting on this outfit has dictated and defined *for us* what our work is about.

“Openness to the accident is...constitutive of the human being. Such an openness gives human beings a destiny and makes one’s life an adventure and not the anticipated development of a program.”³

Many times Beau and Lily surprise us. They demand action that is consistent with the construction, but which is often contrary to our own preconceived notions of who the cowboy is, in particular those notions defined for us by Hollywood during the heyday of the “spaghetti western.” And although we embody the construction, the construction is something completely new and undefined. This can be unnerving at times, forcing us to confront the way we behave and interact in any number of situations. Part of our job in the performance of new personas is to feel our way blindly into the present, to allow ourselves to be led by an unknown hand. In this journey we continually discover new elements of ourselves through the medium of Beau and Lily. We are confronted on a daily basis with the notion of “I” and what that means.

“Are you guys really cowboys? Real cowboys?” people would ask early on. What is a real cowboy? what does he look like? how does he act? what does he sound like? what does he eat? The “real” cowboy is a dying breed in many ways – the amount of land he uses to survive and the ways he earns a living are becoming increasingly unsustainable. Long gone are the cattle drives up from Texas, through Kansas, to the stockyards in Chicago. And though he still exists, it’s the icon of the cowboy that we’re truly interested in: how that myth has contributed to the American consciousness and ideas of what it means to be an American. Because the cowboy, though a real working man (and sometime woman), is also a time-honored American symbol of persistence, self-sufficiency and a hard work ethic. But sadly, the cowboy – like many other

³ Françoise Dastur, “Phenomenology of the Event: Waiting and Surprise,” *Hypatia*, vol. 15, no. 4 (Fall 2000): 182.

American icons –has also become a symbol of a gun-slinging maverick without respect for anything but his own freedom and power, taking what he wants and riding off into the sunset. It is this *image* – the collection of superficial signifiers that create all visual impressions – that we seek to work with, to engage and to question by living as the construction Beau and Lily.

This construction may not make us into “real” cowboys, but – more interestingly for us – it challenges people’s conception of the real; of what is and what can be. The questions we are confronted with on an almost daily basis because of what we wear – because of the image we present – are important because they open a door through which doubt can allow us to redefine the cowboy as a symbol, or perhaps more accurately, to reclaim that symbol as something we can stand behind as our country seeks to redefine itself for the global century. As Daniel Buren points out, it is our work as artists to point to something that is readily available and to re-contextualize it.⁴

Other’s doubt of our authenticity challenged us to become real in our construction. They wanted us to be real cowboys and wanted us to prove to them that we were real cowboys. But could we be real cowboys without raising cattle, riding a horse, eating meat? Could we live in a city? Could we be cowboys and vegetarians?

For many people, being a cowboy is more of an idea, a way to live one’s life, than it is an actual job. The cowboy code is a document of ethical statements to guide a cowboy in navigating all aspects of life, a sort of Western Ten Commandments. Aptly created by the American performer Gene Autry in the 1940s, this document challenges us to examine what we have become and the ways we are represented and perceived.

⁴ Georges Boudaille, “Interview with Daniel Buren: Art is No Longer Justifiable or Setting the Record Straight,” *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, Eds. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999) 67.

Cowboy Code of Honor, or The Cowboy Code

1. A cowboy must never strike first, hit a smaller man or take unfair advantage - even of an enemy.
2. A cowboy never betrays a trust. He never goes back on his word.
3. A cowboy always tells the truth.
4. A cowboy is kind and gentle to small children, old folks, and animals.
5. A cowboy is free from racial and religious intolerances.
6. A cowboy is always helpful when someone is in trouble.
7. A cowboy is always a good worker.
8. A cowboy respects womanhood, his parents and his nation's laws.
9. A cowboy is clean about his person in thought, word, and deed.
10. A cowboy is a patriot.

Using the image, codes and symbols of the “Americanized cowboy” as a way to embody “American-ness” we are attempting, primarily through conversation, image-making and song, to examine the notion and symbology of the cowboy, ideally as a means of beginning to redefine the larger notion of what it means to be an American. How have we strayed from so many of the ideas put forth in the cowboy code? To this point, it’s been our experience that talking about what it means to be a cowboy in the 21st century inevitably sparks conversation about what it means to be an American in the 21st century.

“By pointing to what obstructs critical response, however, astonishment and boredom ask us to ask what ways of responding our culture makes available to us, and under what conditions.”⁵

At the end of 2007, we had been living as Paul and Kate Lindholm, a philosopher and a scientist, respectively, for two years. They were our first conscious effort at constructing ourselves – turning an examined life into a designed life.⁶ As Paul and Kate, we’d lived our life as an experiment, turning the space of our bodies and those spaces they inhabited into a laboratory. Over the course of 24 months, we’d worked to reduce all the fundamental details of our exterior lives to such a state that they were clearly identifiable and reproducible by anyone.

⁵ Sianne Ngai, “Stuplimity: Shock and Boredom in Twentieth-Century Aesthetics,” Postmodern Culture, Volume 10, Number 2, (January 2000): 10.

⁶ Hal Foster, “The ABCs of Contemporary Design,” October, Vol. 100, Obsolescence, (Spring, 2002): 193.

For example, we wore a uniform, ate a pre-determined and repetitive diet, and stored all of our things in a set of identical, scaled boxes. In fact, by the end of the project the infrastructure we'd created was so tight that Paul and Kate had simply become objects within it – living elements of an organic system. At that point, we realized that we could no longer continue as Paul and Kate. This was an incredibly liberating, but also terrifying realization to make. If we were no longer Paul and Kate then who were we?

In February 2008, a friend and mentor suggested to us that we not forget our roots. In particular, the fact that we had come from the Midwest. He said that he had seen too many young artists coming from middle America trying to cover up that fact, both in their personal and professional lives. It was true for us: we'd both run as far and as fast away from that history as we could, thinking of it as redneck, intolerant and close-minded, among other things. But we trusted his counsel and decided to start looking at it again – this time using our work as a direct means to reclaim our own cultural history. Who were the early Americans of the Midwest and the West? What was their life like? What did they have to offer to our work?

Coincidentally (and while still living as Paul and Kate) we'd started watching Clint Eastwood movies. This was a random, but well-considered decision resulting from our inability to efficiently select movies from the thousands of available titles. Because Paul and Kate were very interested in efficiency, it became imperative that we determine a way to do so. Thus, we randomly chose a single director – Clint Eastwood – and decided to watch all of his movies in the order in which they appeared in the library's search tool.

These movies led us to start thinking about the idea of the cowboy, particularly as portrayed by Hollywood. And how that image and portrayal – that myth – had affected the American identity, for better and for worse. And so we made the choice to put on the garb of the

cowboy – to embody an iconography, using a set of signifiers that is instantly recognizable to the outside world – and within America as well (though perhaps somewhat nostalgic). Something that is associated with America and what it means to be an American – the idea of the cowboy, the idea that you can be anything that you want to be just by saying that’s what you are. That as patriotic. And so began Beauregard and Lily Mae Sage.

How do we transition into the future? What can we take with us? What must we leave behind? Though we continue to ask these questions, their intent has changed. Initially, we were simply asking ourselves about our own personal identities: we were committed to fully transforming ourselves into new beings – to constructing an identity from the ground up. How did we do this? What did it mean to who we thought we were and who we could become? How would other people’s impressions of us change? What would our work be about? We are still answering all these questions as Beau and Lily continue to be more fully realized. However, it quickly became apparent that our presentation as Beau and Lily was going to open those questions up to much broader subject matter than who we were as individual human beings. Our interactions with people changed dramatically.

Here is a small, but emblematic example: As Paul and Kate we looked very official. Because of a need to control environmental variables, our daily actions were very rigid. We wore the same clothes everyday, matching monochrome uniforms; we ate the same food everyday, a well-balanced menu consisting of bulk grains and beans with fresh fruit and vegetables. We walked in a consistent and controlled manner between defined points gathering data along the way. People asked us for directions frequently because we looked like we knew the answer. When we transitioned away from Kate and Paul into Lily and Beau, people stopped asking us for directions in the city. (Was it because we looked like a couple of yokels from the country?)

Chicagoans began treating us as tourists, even when we told them that we live here and go to school here; overall treating us very kindly – almost as if they were ambassadors of the city. We started getting asked frequently for money. Cowboys are recognizable – and homeless people began directly addressing us. They could see us coming down the street and would yell out, “Hey Tex!”, or “Cowboy, I like that hat”, or “Wild Bill can you spare a dollar?” As Paul and Kate we had rarely been asked for money, and never addressed directly. As Beau and Lily, we found ourselves directly engaged with people who were addressing the cowboy construction, and to our surprise we felt impelled to help them out, to give them a dollar. It turns out that Lily and Beau are small scale philanthropists. Which may be one way forward. Dropping our pretensions, our self-importance, engaging with those who need help and being generous.

In addition, and most interestingly for us, we began to find ourselves regularly engaged in conversations about America: what it means to be a cowboy, what that symbol speaks of, what we as Americans must do to transition successfully and meaningfully into the future. In her essay, “To Argue for a Video of Representation. To Argue for a Video Against the Mythology of Everyday Life,” Martha Rosler warns us that,

“In pursuit of meaning, also, we are led to see meaning where there is only emptiness and sham, strength where there is only violence or money, knowledge where there is only illusion, honesty where there is only a convincing manner, status where there is only a price tag, satisfaction where there is only a cattle prod, limitless freedom where there is only a feed lot. Our entire outlook is conditioned by the love and the terror of consumption.”⁷

Though written decades ago, this statement is particularly prescient. As we look around at our country – especially with the recent stock market crises, the continuing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the shamelessness with which we as a culture continue to consume raw

⁷ Martha Rosler, “To Argue for a Video of Representation. To Argue for a Video Against the Mythology of Everyday Life,” *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology* ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999) 367.

materials and natural resources around the globe – one cannot help but feel as though the time is right now, that the time must be now, for us to redefine ourselves, in our own eyes and in the eyes of the world.

In his essay, “Embodiment and Cultural Phenomenology,” Thomas Csordas writes that “If embodiment is an existential condition in which the body is the subjective source or inter-subjective ground of experience, then studies under the rubric of embodiment are not 'about' the body per se. Instead they are about culture and experience insofar as these can be understood from the standpoint of bodily being-in-the-world.”⁸

For our photographic series, *Beau and Lily Tour the Colonies*, we’ve inserted our images into a number of American and world institutions as a way of reflecting on the role of America in a global environment. We’re interested in questioning what it means to be an American in the twenty-first century: what can we carry with us and what must we leave behind? As Beau likes to ask: Is it possible to be a vegetarian and a cowboy at the same time? Beau and Lily embody a specific institutional critique, they’re cowboys after all. On the street, in the stock market, in a long voting line, they have become disrupters that causes relational ruptures.

It’s not about participating in a way that we have some kind of power in the situation, or that all of a sudden we are part of any of the groups that we have inserted ourselves into. It’s more that we are embodying and engaging in a “gestural dialogue,” with the “real” participants in the photos. In some ways, it is similar to a piece we did as Paul and Kate called “Gestural Mimetics,” where one of us tried to mimic exactly the bodily positions and gestures of the other. Doing this piece required an immense amount of concentration on the other person’s movements, even going so far as their breathing patterns. But as we learned, both as part of “Gestural

⁸ Thomas Csordas, “Embodiment and Cultural Phenomenology,” Perspectives on Embodiment: The Intersections of Nature and Culture, ed. Gail Weiss and Honi Fern Haber, (New York, NY: Routledge, 1999) 143.

Mimetics” and the photo series, “Beau and Lily Tour the Colonies, “Attention to what appears insignificant is an important trait of an observer of people...”⁹ and leads one into a sort of bodily conversation and identification with the person that is being observed and mimicked.

In the “Tour the Colonies” photos, we had to choose the people we were going to replace and had to look closely at them and at their surroundings, really starting to examine these environments where we will never actually be standing. And it wasn’t just the physical environments we were examining, but also the people that were standing in them – the looks they had on their faces, the clothes they’re wearing, the way they held their hands and their heads. We were forced to directly confront persons (and the institutions they represent) in a way that will most probably never be available to us in any way but through recorded images. However, in our increasingly mediated and media-saturated world, “We best comprehend ourselves as social entities in looking at photos of ourselves, assuming the voyeur’s role with respect to our own images; we best know ourselves from within in looking through the viewfinder at other people and things.”¹⁰

Using these appropriated photos as a platform to examine identity is like living a digital life in the analog – we have one foot in each world. We’ve thought more about democracy, more about what it means to be an American and the future of that, since putting on the cowboy hat, had more conversations about it, than we ever have in our entire lives. What does that mean to our future – personally, professionally, and as part of a culture?

⁹ Michael Hagner, “Toward a History of Attention in Culture and Science,” *MLN* 118 (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003) 675.

¹⁰ Rosler, 367.

“With the past no longer accessible to us and the present largely unreadable outside of its relation to the past, we must find our truths in the interstices.”¹¹ The idea was to insert ourselves as Beau and Lily into existing American(-ized) power structures as democratic/capitalistic tourists. So what does that mean exactly? What is a power structure? Who are these people that stand in for us as Americans in these global institutions? What place do we have standing next to them? Who are we in relationship to these Others?

To create the series, we had to think about what it would mean to find ourselves in places of American power. It would have to do with Money. It would have to do with Politics & Government. And so our first idea was exportation: places with long voting lines (ideally places where we’d “exported” democracy), stock exchanges (places where we’d exported capitalism), and NATO family portraits (places where we’d exported value systems – in this case, into a trans-national military structure). Our hope was to use our bodies as a means for examining ideas of installing democracy/capitalism in the same way that we installed ourselves into these situations via photographic manipulation.

Sol LeWitt has long been an influence in our work. In particular, sentence number 28 from his “Sentences on Conceptual Art”: “Once the idea of the piece is established in the artist’s mind and the final form is decided, the process is carried out blindly. There are many side effects that the artist cannot imagine. These may be used as ideas for new works.”¹²

We have not finished our work on the “Tour the Colonies” photo series, and we feel that the New American Cowboy Project is just beginning. Both writing and performative speaking are integral mediums for our practice, and we felt there were two options for writing about this series of photographs. One is completely constructed: we make up a fictional account of going to

¹¹ Lebow, 50.

¹² Sol Lewitt, Sentences on Conceptual Art, Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999) 107.

all these different places and what it was like there and how it made us feel, the conversations that we had. The other is that we talk about them in terms of constructed reality: placing ourselves into existing images as a way of inhabiting structures and embodying gestures of power, what we earlier referred to as gestural dialogues.

One is the talk of an artist about his work, the other is the talk of an artist as his work. We're interested in both, and have included an excerpt from a talk we're currently working on as a way of employing both of these approaches. For the talk, we would be speaking simultaneously, each of us alternately speaking from the perspective of the technical process and the fictional narrative, layering construction over construction.

Beau: Well that time was in Kosovo and it was really cold, I remember that. Everyone was bundled up. And they all looked so tired.

Lily: (at same time) The photograph was the result of a Google image search under the parameters "Family portraits, extra large image size." It was found November 11, 2008 at 2 am.

Beau: The original image size is 2480 x 2110. In order to make the images, we began by taking a series of self portraits. These portraits had to replicate as closely as possible the exact gestures and expressions of particular characters in the original image in order for the final image to be more easily constructed.

Lily: (at the same time) Yeah – and we were really tired too. We'd been traveling at that point for about 15 days. And it had already been, I dunno, what, about 21 countries. And it was cold. We were freezing actually because we'd forgotten to bring coats with us and we only had enough money for food at that point.

Beau: Right, because my wallet had been stolen in Frankfurt. And that had the credit cards in it and we hadn't gotten those replaced yet.

Lily: (at the same time) This notion of embodiment is one that is very important in our work. Not exactly about the body, but about "bodily being-in-the-world."

We're currently exploring how the objects of everyday experience – what we wear, eat, watch, read and surround ourselves with – create us and the interactions we have with others. Our investigation of the nature and construction of identity and its systems has led us to consider things as small as the way we wear a hat to issues as large as the way we build and inhabit both public and private spaces. To this end, we use our own bodies as experimental sites for performing the self.

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