The Event of Art

Marc Lafia, Mathieu Borysevicz, Daniel Coffeen

Published by Punctum Books

Marc Lafia, et al.
The Event of Art.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/80764

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2762897
17

Eternal Sunshine
After showing *Art as Instructions* in Shanghai (later done as a book) I was invited to do a one-person show at the Minsheng Art Museum. (All of this happened because of Mathieu Borysevicz, who I had met at a residency at the Atlantic Center for the Arts.)

Though I had wanted to do works with groups and site specific interventions, with *Eternal Sunshine* (2011–2012), the installations were very much participatory in the sense of the art object and the audience coming into a conversation. That happens in the experience of art, always, yes, but with a work that is structured to be participatory, the difference is that the viewer, the individual becomes a public, and rather than having a one-on-one experience with the work, the work turns the audience onto themselves, both as group and individual. The work sees them. The work is their engagement and yes, the lounge and pool and blackboards are “works of art” and could be guarded but here they are open to be touched, tactilely explored. The work of art is putting them in relation to those around them, to enact what it is to be public, what it is to be in space sanctioned as art, what is it to be simultaneously private and public, in an emerging public-private everywhere of the network, where all is art and performing.

I had four large rooms to fill. The first conceit or strategy was to create a large communal space, a pool lounge for the audience to relax read converse, putting on themselves to each other. The art work and the audience could not be separated. It was performed, the space like software was a format to put on the audience.

By then I had done a good deal with instructions and interactions and the event of art, its material, and here the audience, subjectivation in the cinema and cultural practices come together.

It was called *Eternal Sunshine*. 
It will also allow me to spend some time to show you how this comes together by various non-linear and parallel investigations in my own practice of art which includes films, photographs, objects and installations.

The works in *Eternal Sunshine* critiqued the new cultural order as an ecstatic artifice. In this order, mediated by personal computer networks normative values are reproduced as consumable objects and the individual’s identity is played like a pawn. On the one side we see the community, empathy and transcendence that the global network inspires. On the other side we see how yesterday’s dystopian world looks utopian today and how concepts such as open, transparent, non-hierarchical, and participatory promise inclusion and empowerment yet in turn have exploited individual desire for the sake of benefit.

The installation wanted to performatively bring awareness to the data colonization of the social by new media companies but of course in a happy way.

*Eternal Sunshine* is akin to a big party in which viewers experience a very physical appreciation of the artworks.

The main room is bathed in strong light, with a mock, waterless swimming pool in the center all set up for visitors to “frolic” around. Around the “pool,” reclining chairs, beach umbrellas and a set of jazz drums are set up. A ping-pong table and two blackboards (for graffiti lovers) offer extra interactive amusement for visitors. “The space works more as a ‘summer social’ than a formal exhibition piece, and this perhaps gets viewers thinking about how social networks and interactions work in our daily lives,” Lafia told the *Global Times*. “Art is always an event of becoming, an encounter, a way to be present to oneself,” he said.

The 56-year-old American artist (as well a photographer and filmmaker) was invited to exhibit by Zhou Tiehai, the director of the Minsheng Art Museum after Zhou saw his work *Art as Invention* at the Shanghai Gallery of Art.

For this show, Lafia has created a space which will “transform the virtual domain of online social networks into a large-scale interactive installation,” in his own words.

Lafia added: “The space in the context of other works will be an active metaphor for our technocratic society. putting social relations in relief or in advance of a contemplative or passive relation as is often the case in a museum,” he said.

It would invite us to get happy and at the same time question what this happiness is, what it might mean. Is it in us, the system, in each other, outside us, in nature, or in our desires?”

Outside of the swimming pool room, there are 44 digits prints of films stills, all from Chinese, French, and Japanese films, and all arrayed in straight lines. Each picture carries its original title and explanation and the Chinese translations.
“The sequence of stills creates a nonlinear reading of characters and themes across cultures and generations as a way to explore the relationship of the individual to society, but moreover the individual’s desire for personal revolution in relaxation to society revolution,” Lafia told the Global Times.

(Global Times Metro Shanghai, 30 December 2011)

The exhibition had 4 rooms and included these works.

- Eternal Sunshine the installation
- Public Relations
- Film Stills, Still History
- Double Fantasy
- Self Exposures
- Chat Roulette

Eternal Sunshine: Installation, Main Room

Eternal Sunshine is constructed around an imaginary swimming pool which helps to set the scene of a warm summer afternoon. Strewn around the pool are lounge areas, a ping-pong table, video monitors, an open microphone, electric guitar, and other activity stations including a series of ad hoc questions listed on a blackboard that encourages audience feedback. Surveys ask audience members
to list their favorite books, films, vacation spots, and emails. Free refreshments, art and dance classes, karaoke sessions and popular magazines are provided as a way to retain the audience and encourage them to customize the space to fit their own expressions, needs and tastes.

While this open recreational space is fun and relaxing, it is also a laboratory, a place to inventory people’s likes and dislikes, their fears, pleasures, intimate longings and desires. In one corner of the room we see signs, “more happy music,” “more sun,” “evacuate.” These signals suggest that this enjoyable place is actually pre-designed, a software program beyond our control. The signs also suggest that the environment is continually being optimized and personalized. In fact museum staff will update any requests of the participants, whether it is to play their favorite songs, change the color of the lighting or add their favorite flavor refreshment, all in effort to streamline the eternal sunshine of utopia.

*Eternal Sunshine* employs art as an event and uses networks, both private and public, to affect a cultural space that produces in the end, what we know as globalization.
Presented along with this installation are Lafia’s print and video works that investigate how subjectivities, once constructed through cinematic representation have changed over time to become a global condition in which the individual now represents themselves through social media in the network. Today there is no need to go to the movies we are each in our own, endless film.

Public Relations: Hugs and Kisses: Prints, Main Room

The economic elite have controlled society since the dawn of civilization. Today’s elite are more insidious as they try to conceal their elitism from the world. In global capitalism, we’re all purportedly the same. But just as the aristocrats of old feared the masses and their so-called irrational forces, today’s economic elite fear the potential madness of the people. But rather than subjugating them, the new elite deploy the masses, transforming them into atoms whose emotional and sexual forces are highly supervised.

We live in an age of managed masses where the very way we think about ourselves is shaped through all pervasive marketing mechanisms and what’s called “public relations.” Here, then, are a series of color field prints with statements that address the psychology of this condition. Texts that allude to persuasion,
individuality, the social, the public, aggression and passivity, have been engineered as commands to influence behavior and thought. Catch phrases packaged for the attention deficient perpetuate the rise of modern consumerism, its role in the construction of the self and how this self relates back to the world, alas—public relations.

Film Stills, Still History: Prints, Hallway
This series of prints are screen and subtitle excerpts from Chinese, French and Japanese films spanning the past fifty years. The sequence of stills creates a non-linear reading of cinematic history by piecing together characters and themes across cultures and generations as a way to explore the relationship of the individual to society, but moreover the individual’s personal revolution in relationship to societal revolution. The series of stills constructs a pre-globalization narrative about the universal desire for human freedom. It also addresses how subjectivities have changed over time and, more importantly, how globalization has now constructed a post-national subjective condition. If there was once a political process that engaged people’s rational, conscious minds with the aim of facilitating their needs as a society, society is now atomized, the individual known and quantified as a set of narrow self-interests outside any conception of a social whole. We are managed numbers who live under the illusion, perpetuated by the socio-economic elite, that we are empowered and emotionally valid human beings.
This dialog between film, history, memory, and society is further explored in *Double Fantasy*, Lafia’s double-channel, video love letter to China. *Double Fantasy* was the title of a John Lennon and Yoko Ono LP released in 1980 wherein husband and wife conducted a musical dialogue. In Lafia’s work distinct cultures prior to globalization look at one another via cinematic montage. The juxtapositions of film and news footage clips lead to a series of productive misrecognitions, phantasms and mirroring wherein each culture becomes a promise to the other for a better world.

In *Quitting*, a film set in the late ‘90’s Beijing, actor Jia Hongsheng believes John Lennon to be his spiritual father. Jia Hongsheng’s personal revolt, his struggle with himself eventually leads to his suicide and foreshadows a turn in subjectivity for 20th century China from being part of a social collective to a self that’s alone with that vast interior of the unknowable self. The identification of Jia with John Lennon is mirrored in Godard’s *La Chinoise* (1967). Here Mao’s little red book is employed as a source of historical analysis and inspiration for the ‘68 Parisian
student revolt. This French avant-garde masterpiece is quite distinct from the critical portrayal of the Cultural Revolution seen through the eyes of Tian Zhuangzhuang in his film *The Blue Kite* (1992). Here Mao’s revolt is a source of personal tragedy as the desire of a family to acquire more leisure and culture is violently repudiated by the collective. Zhu Xijuan in *The Red Detachment of Women* (1961), is a young revolutionary peasant in search of self-consciousness while Anne Wiazemsky in *La Chinoise*, is a young, self-conscious, bourgeoisie, youth in search of revolution.

The final sequence of Lafia’s *Double Fantasy* summarizes the conundrum of this revolutionary, cross-cultural desire. On one side news clips show Mao Zedong promoting the great proletarian revolution to thousands of followers. On the other side we see a concert clip of The Beatles performing their famous song, “Revolution,” which renounces Mao, and violent revolt with the lyrics “But if you go carrying pictures of Chairman Mao / You ain’t going to make it with anyone anyhow.” The double fantasy of historical consciousness is complete.
Hi How are You Guest 10497 brings us back into a contemporary moment, where one can reach out across the world wide web to connect to other ‘private’ spaces. In this video work, a woman, living alone in Manhattan, tries to find a way out of her solitude through connections in the strange new world of the online network. Through this simple departure point complex issues emerge: What is it to be alone? What is it being one’s self? What is it being a woman today? What is it to be real, to be naked, with another—who is only on screen? The actress, Raimonda Skeryte explores these questions by becoming a mirror for seeing our own sexuality, our boredom, and global interconnected loneliness. From encounters with Yakuza gangsters to international sex workers and through Skeryte’s own sexual awakening the film gives visibility to how images of our selves are created in our digital society. It is simultaneously an exploration of what it means to make—and watch—film today; what it means to inhabit a system that is always recording, where identity is always and already enmeshed in the web of becoming.

Raindrop Ecstasy:
3 Screen Installation, 8min, Video Room 2

Another video work expresses how contemporary society, overloaded with stimulation, is continually in search of even greater sensory experiences. Raindrop Ecstasy, is a three channel, multidimensional love story in set during a rainy night in New York City. Four young people find themselves quietly in search, against the obvious, for an ultimate experience. As they follow their instincts, some as costumed superheroes play fighting in the rain soaked streets, others alone in crowded Koreatown eating ice-cream, the night becomes shorter and draws them to a Karaoke bar. There under the colored lights they see themselves on a large screen and sing to the The Magnetic Fields’ kaleidoscopic song “Take Ecstasy with Me.”
Displayed in the same corner of the room as *Hi How are You Guest 10497*, the print series *Self Exposure* explores public platforms for communication and social networks through an aesthetic and conceptual lens. These three-hundred screen captures shows the artist in conversation with different people from all around the world in the online social interface Chatroulette. Social Media like Chatroulette not only presents us with a new kind of public space, it replaces what was once a spectacle—where the dividing line between performers and the audience was very clear—with new modes of discourse, of writing and image making. Here the traditional modes of representation and consumption have been intertwined. In the online chat room the individual is constituted by a series of postures and probing. As the artist states “‘I’ am the photographer’s eyes, the viewfinder, I am the object and its double, the subject that constitutes myself for its own consumption. I affirm and author myself. I arouse myself. I narrate myself. I become myself in the image.
I use the pose as a carnival to myself, of myself, for myself, to supersede any other possible definitions of me, to indeed define myself.”

This kind of encounter is at once a collective and an isolated incident, a private experience within the communal network. These prints record this society of individual moments, a network of fragmented selves that nonetheless are not fragmented. As artworks the prints address questions of what and where performance space, public space, and institutional space is. It also questions the act of photography itself by presenting portraiture as a double wherein the hierarchy of photographer and subject, the seen and being seen, has collapsed.