

THE JOKE'S ON YOU:

Art, Authorship and Humor

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Abstract

This body of work is supposed to be funny. It's not to entertain you, but rather me. I expected to intellectualize a few gags, pull a fast one on the art world and all the while, wringing my hands together steeped in my own genius. Not so much. Academia interrupted my entire plan with its formalities. Well, that and I definitely introduced a worm or two into my own personal can. It was here that the serious began to supersede the silly. The evolving themes of humor, language and artifice are a focus in my work—while using objects as collaborators to manifest these critical concepts into Art. It is through the use of sarcastic simulacrum and the exploration of medium and global collaboration that ideas and questions of authorship develop.

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Introduction

1. Humor and Art
 - a. Authorship
 - b. Evolution of work
2. Depletion of Identity Globalization
 - a. Collaboration and domain of authorship
 - b. Symbol and Language
 - c. Appropriation
3. Objects
 - a. Fascination with Object
 - b. Humor within the Irony
 - c. The Others and Flags

Conclusion

The concepts of art, authorship and humor are quite slippery. These ideas are important to the core structure of my work. The subversion of authorship began to evolve within my studio practice through my exploration of gag studies and the use of artifice as an expression of form. Though humor is not the driver, it does manifest as an undercurrent within the work being highlighted.

Foucault¹ argues that the author represents a mode of individualism, with the relationship between the author and the text signaling the figures presence as a writer. This introduces the idea that the author is both subjective and objective, with the authority of claiming entitlement to the text once it is written. All of the written work is done through the lens of the author. This proves, writing and art making are limited to the language and medium being utilized to express the concepts relative to authorship. Artists throughout history have played with this idea. The following work will demonstrate how humor and objects operate within a fine art context while challenging the ideas of authorship.

Picasso would draw and sign napkins and leave them as tips, thus claiming they represent an enormous amount of monetary value because he is their author. Similarly, Piero Manzoni² signed people and sold them a certificate of authenticity. This type of work mocks the art market and pokes fun at the consumer. They also make confident claims regarding the value of authorship. This use of artifice and language spiced by humor presents an artistic equation interesting enough to explore.

¹ (Foucault)

²“Manzoni is one of those rare, dexterous minds equally adept at generating both the theatrical sort of object that qualifies as concrete comedy...” “...he makes many moves that continue to resonate today. In the *Living Sculpture* exhibition, 22 April 1961, in Milan, Manzoni signs people.” “Manzoni isn’t only extending Duchamp’s ‘readymade’ concept to others’ bodies; by functioning as a sort of signing machine he’s objectifying himself as well. (Robbins)



Piero Manzoni
Living Sculpture
Size Variable
Human
1960



Pablo Picasso
Signed Napkin
Size Unknown
Napkin
1970

How can this type of art practice be made into a commodity? Can humor be utilized as a medium to support art? How does an artist maintain or subvert the value of authorship?

The slight nuance that differentiates humor from a joke is found within the action. Creating jokes and finding ways to convey humor within an artistic context is difficult in a sense. Objects are a particular medium which can be employed to develop funny types of artwork. In which case the object is acting as performer, conveying the joke as a comedienne would. Humor becomes a language which is represented nonverbally—a purveyor of irony.

A signature carries the power to purchase, consume, authorize and control—all with the stroke defined as a mark that identifies its author. The exploitation of self assists the artist in distancing themselves from what is being created. An artist typically signs their work upon completion; signaling the artists' authorship..

The answer starts with *Paper Napkin*.**Error! Bookmark not defined.** This work is in an edition of one thousand *Paper Napkins***Error! Bookmark not defined.**, which appear to be signed 4"x4" cocktail napkins. All of the original signatures are written on

³ (Manzoni)

⁴ Napkin signed by Picasso (Prints)

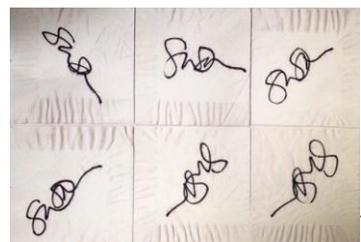
actual crumpled-up napkins. There are six different images of my signature to generate a single copy for mass production.⁷ The variety of different signatures contributes to the works presentation and overall allusion as artifice. It is a piece of paper with the image of a napkin and an image of my signature. This type of manufacture removes the artist from process and begins to subvert authorship. The work is shown in a shiny black plastic bar caddy, complete with blue and white striped paper straws and multi-colored cocktail umbrellas. The artifice is represented within the *Paper Napkin* as well as with the *Paper Napkins*—one is just as strong as all one thousand together.



Sarah Bates Washburn
Paper Napkin
4x4 inches
Paper
2014



Sarah Bates Washburn
Paper Napkins
7x7 inches
Paper, Paper Straws,
Paper Umbrellas
and Plastic Bar Caddy
2014



Sarah Bates Washburn
Paper Napkins: Uncut Sheet
8x12 inches
2014

The actual paper napkins themselves are objects and the signature on each of the napkins entitle their authorship. The image of my signature on the image of a napkin may or may not carry the same value as an original signature.

The printer acts as the producer, eliminating the human hand altogether. This space offers the ability to reflect about where the significance of authorship lies. The images of the signatures image on napkins are claiming to be Art. The implied value is projected to the consumer by presenting the object as Art; to sell them as such gives them value. This is when the art becomes currency. The consumer deciphers whether or not

⁵ (Washburn, Paper Napkin)

⁶ (Washburn, Paper Napkins)

⁷ (Washburn, Paper Napkins: Uncut sheet)

the artifice is more valuable than the actual—my signature versus the image of my signature. The irony involving the exchange of paper money for paper napkins—the hilarity of simulacra⁸ for simulacra—further illustrates the idea of humor within authorship. In an attempt to assimilate the work into contradictory, self-involved, somewhat sarcastic and overtly humorous context, one must experiment with the depletion of self.



Sarah Bates Washburn
Depletion of Identity
26x52 inches
Ink on Canvas
2014

*Depletion of Identity*⁹ like *Paper Napkins* presents the image of my signature as a representation of the original. The image in this process comes from two of my signatures—one small and one large. The signatures are then transferred onto screens. Repeating the silkscreened image multiple times depletes the print as the screen breaks down from its original state, thus taking the power out of the signature by subverting its authenticity and presenting it as artifice in the form of Art. Therefore, the image of the signature transitions with every pass. Though the signature presents repetitious pattern, it reveals a depletion of the original, which is really a copy of the actual signature. If you

⁸ “From their conceptual origins, simulacra were instruments of illusion. Although the simulacrum’s dictionary definition stays constant as a ‘mere image, a specious imitation or likeness,’ the concept has shifted through time according to social relations and systems of power, and the signifying practices they imply.” (Linker)

⁹ (Washburn, *Depletion of Identity*)

are interested in obtaining a copy of my signature, please call the toll-free number below.¹⁰

Depletion of Identity aims to deplete the image of the signature until it completely abstracts, representing only color, shape and form. The piece is a diptych with the left panel white and the right panel black, each generating a reverse negative of the other. The signature is silkscreened all-over the canvas in a horizontal and vertical pattern with two different size screens, each prepped with two different sized signatures. *Depletion of Identity* is a print of many signatures presenting as an unsigned painting. Initially, the work explores humor and objects and begins to challenge authorship and how the work can mock art culture, criticism and consumerism. It is a reflection of the larger, a macrocosm of western space—the place and time we live within. Each artist is a mirror within their own universe based on their interpretation of the world. The irony of authorship within an artwork comes with the questions of production, manufacture, deconstruction the recontextualization. All of these elements integrate the ideas of authorship with an undercurrent of humor.

My work is filtered through authorship in order to escape the late modernist legacy which stems from self-indulgent, ego driven, self-referential entitlements of Andy Warhol, the factory, POP Art, and mass production challenging similar notions of authorship. Warhol's work of art titled, *Marilyn Diptych*¹¹ demonstrates the irony of Marilyn Monroe, the character versus Norma Jean, the original. The deconstruction of Norma Jean's identity represented in black and white depletion while the construction of Marilyn's identity is in full color.

¹⁰ 1(800)999-1959



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Andy Warhol
Marilyn Diptych
80.88x114 inches
Print
Tate, London.
1962

Some art replicates its own identity as object within the process of constructing the work. The printing method is similar to the breakdown that occurred while making *Depletion of Identity*; this method of art-making challenges the artist to present the process of replication and depletion—subjectively as well as objectively. This relates back to Foucault’s discussions on the very nature of what an author is—an author appropriates signs and symbols representing a language only understood by those able to consume it. The exclusive becomes inclusive, while the author remains elusive.

The value of authorship and artifice within Art is ironic. Surely Picasso’s napkin would sell for more than an image of that napkin. The goal here is to sell the image of my signature; *Paper Napkins* or *Depletion of Identity* instead of the original signature, thus assigning it value and turning it into a form of money. Art can act as currency; this can allude to the irony of an object presented as art. An object otherwise viewed merely as an object changes context when it is labeled as art, therefore, it gains value.

¹¹ (Warhol)

My work began to morph into a three-dimensional space, while maintaining some two-dimensional sensibilities. In a sense they are all paintings, even if they appear as sculpture. Once the work is experienced, the mental recollection of the work is two-dimensional, thus rendering all things perceptibly flat. Not in a Christopher Columbus sense, rather a Paul McCarthy sense, such as *Tree*.¹²



Hausier & Wirth | Hausier & Wirth - 30
Paul McCarthy's 'Tree' is now on display in Place Vendôme, Paris, as part of @FIAC 2014! #art
#sculpture #paris
👉 Reply 📌 Retweet ⭐ Favorite

Paul McCarthy
Tree
79 feet
Inflatable Sculpture
Paris, France. 2014



12

13

Paul McCarthy
Tree: Deflated after being vandalized
79 flat feet
Deflated Inflatable Sculpture
Paris, France. 2014

The art world tends to write-off humor as low-brow. This elitist attitude prevails with the unsupported high-brow claim that something funny couldn't possibly be perceived as smart. This leads to overly verbose, intensely dry artist statements. In the words of Calvin and Hobbes: "As my artist's statement explains, my work is utterly incomprehensible and is therefore full of deep significance."

*Artist Statement*¹⁴ is a response to pseudo-intellectual artists and the complicated artist statements they write to assist others in understanding the particular focus within a series of work. *Artist Statement* is a 5'x7' foot area rug. The rug is hand dyed wool, off white with the border and text of the rug black. The intent is for the viewer to read my statement, and then walk all-over it. The physical creation of this piece continues to highlight the issue of authorship in a more prevalent way. Upon the pieces initial

¹² (McCarthy, *Tree*)

¹³ Image of *Tree* deflated after being vandalized (McCarthy, *Tree*)

¹⁴ (Washburn, *Artist Statement*)

conception, it consisted of a digital file and a piece of paper with black text. After conducting extensive research, I found outsourcing to be an inexpensive way to have custom work made. From there, the concept transformed into a rug, with the work outsourced to India. This process further displaces the artist by employing other artists to articulate the work worlds away. The making of a single rug involves a minimum of 5-10 people's efforts for approximately three weeks from start to finish. I requested the artists in India who worked on the rug to sign the back, adding my signature to it upon its delivery. Signatures are indicative of authorship, yet this process is collaborative. It is important to acknowledge the anonymity of the artists in India as equal collaborators on the work of Art. They are no more or no less the author than I am.



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Sarah Bates Washburn
Artist Statement
5x7 feet
Handmade Wool Rug
2015

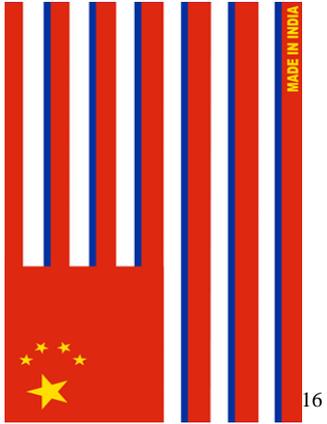
In the article, "*The Death of the Author*,"¹⁵ this very idea is highlighted. Barthes poses the question of who the real author is within a work being created. His claim is that all ideas are borrowed from other ideas woven together by the works preceding it. Our personal beliefs drive our interpretations, therefore introducing a new variable to an already present idea. The intrinsic value of this type of ideology relates to *Paper Napkin*,

¹⁵ (Barthes)

Depletion of Identity and *The Artist Statement*. Whether or not the work is outsourced to India or a printer within the United States—authorship is challenged. The United States flag is a powerful and significant symbol, and when subverted or challenged causes tremendous controversy.

It is the overtness of *The Artist Statement* that led to the development of *The United States of China, Made in India*.¹⁸ It is important to me to maintain the integrity of the language of symbols, while subverting the intended language of the symbols in order to be effective and a bit humorous. The work of Art elicits a progression of perception. There are so many prevalent political and economic issues woven within the individual knots of the rug. *The Artist Statement* is becoming secondary.

The *United States of China, Made in India* was made shortly after the *Artist Statement*. *The United States of China, Made in India* is a composite of two flags, the United States flag and the Chinese flag. Once the process of creating the composite culminated, it was outsourced to the same company in India that produced the *Artist Statement*. *The United States of China, Made in India* is a hand knotted rug made of silk; gesturing the medium to have representational attributes. The silk contains a sheen that manipulates the colors of the flag, based on one's physical position, not their political position.



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Sarah Bates Washburn
United States of China, Made in India
5x7inches
Meta-Image
2015



17
Aakash Malapani
Rug Artists
5x7 inches
Color Photograph
2015



18
Sarah Bates Washburn
United States of China, Made in India
5x7 feet
Handmade Silk Rug
2015

It can be difficult to bridge the gap between the ideas of art, authorship and the language of objects. The bridge in this case is art and authorship via global collaboration. These rugs reintroduce the conversations relative to authorship in a globally political and economic arena through this collaboration. Geopolitics and global economics are extensive themes. Politics are influenced by the economy of a country, which is driven by currency—each is interwoven with one another. The rug illustrates this as an economically viable idea as the concept is being communicated from the United States and manifested into a work of art in India.

The utilitarian purpose of a rug is to provide a portable cover for the floor possibly for comfort, warmth or decoration. Rugs are no joke! There is such a rich history in rug making and much to consider regarding the process: the lives of the artists producing the rug, the rugs' origin, the animal from which the wool was harvested from...where do the animals live? Are they factory farmed animals? Was the animal

¹⁶ (Washburn, The United States of China, Made in India: meta-image)

¹⁷ (Malapani)

¹⁸ (Washburn, United States of China, Made in India)

mistreated? In the case of silk, how many silk worms does it take to make a rug? Did they get tired? Do they feel violated when they are boiled in their pods? These questions concerning the artists and the materials they utilize to create the rug, give rise to the issue of the objects identity. Then one must look at the rug as object versus the rug as art versus the rug as a joke. This is all before the rug is even ordered on-line; worlds away, never touched by the artist until it arrives wrapped and finished at the door; presenting an image as an object of representation; a piece imagined by an artist in the United States and made in India, once again challenging the idea of authorship.

The issues revolving around global economics and geopolitics are quite extensive; as is the discussion relative to exploitation and the profound role it plays the emphasis here is with authorship. This is when humor becomes painful. Something as innocent as *Artist Statement* opened up an entire can of worms. It is hard to keep an open-mind when something appears to be wrong. The ideas of integration and separation are pertinent to this thought process. One cannot impose their ethnocentricities upon another cultural, political and economic value system. Once homeostasis is achieved, it is much more comfortable to explore perceived exploitation; by outsourcing the work, the idea of challenging authorship manifests itself through collaboration. Upon the completion of *The Artist Statement, The United States of China, Made in India* seems like a natural transition to communicate these ideas.

The United States of China, Made in India is conceived in the United States of America using a composite flag melding both the United States flag with that of China. It was then woven with silk as medium, created in India—then shipped to the United States fully conceptualized from the file provided. This work is a physical manifestation of this

thesis. It is almost as if the United States cannot exist without China or India and vice versa—they are all intertwined. This response is generated through the ideas of politics and economics in a global forum based on global collaborations. As the piece developed and the rug began the process of its creation, what initially started as a gag began to morph into something more. The rug cost a total of \$330 for the entire manufacture, including shipping within forty-five days. There is a running joke in my circle about little kids making the rug. In an attempt to furnish proof of this being false, pictures displaying the process of the rug being made were requested.

The United States of China, Made in India took a couple weeks longer and cost more than *Artist Statement* because the medium changed from wool to silk. The process is intensive, exhausting and laborious. And it shows—*Artist Statement* is the sweetest, softest rug. *The United States of China, Made in India* is even softer. They feel real because they are real. The wool is from an animal and not some synthetic spun from plastic bottles. The silk is pure and delightful. The *Artist Statement* is the reason the evolution and integration of ideas regarding global politics and global economics present themselves within the work.

Authorship tends to be relative to the use of the flag as a medium and when it is represented as an object. The initial introduction of outsourcing into my studio practice was to seek an inexpensive yet aesthetically comparable work that couldn't be created without this type of global collaboration. The irony within the manufacture of this particular object is a paradox of production for the United States. The majority of American flags are made in China.¹⁹ The U.S. military has banned the use of American

¹⁹ “94 Percent of American Flags Imported Into the U.S. Last Year Came From China.” “3.6 million worth of the flags came from China, according to data from the U.S. Census Bureau. (Berman)

flags made outside of the U.S., though other federal agencies still fly foreign made American flags. The claimed reasoning being that lawmakers felt flags made in the U.S. are much too expensive.²⁰

The American flag is the most significant symbol in our country. It represents freedom, power, strength, sacrifice, and dignity.²¹ Exploitation is an underwriter of the American flag. This claim is unpopular at best and on target at the least. Just ask Scott Tyler. The symbol of the flag has been a theme utilized by different artists over the years to represent a variety of issues relative to their time. *The United States of China, Made in India* is a representational response to the irony of the contemporary global relationships within the western world.



Jasper Johns
Flag
3'6"x5'1" feet
Encaustic and newspaper
Museum of Modern Art, New York. 1954

In 1954 Jasper Johns creates *Flag*.²² This is a two-dimensional encaustic painting, covering a collage comprised of ripped newspaper. The composition mimics the American Flag—alternating red and white stripes with a blue field in the top left corner with 48 white stars contained within it. The stars are symbols we recognize as the shape

²⁰ (FoxNews)

²¹ "I pledge allegiance to the flag to the United States of China. And to the Republic of India for which it stands, one nation under some entity, indivisible, with occasional liberty and justice for some." (Washburn, The Pledge)

²² (Johns, Flag)

that represents stars, even though this is not what a real star looks like. The composition is an abstraction of representation.

This piece signals the American flag as a symbol and all of the power it commands. The physical representation of the flag in the form of Art introduces the idea of the flag as an object. The work takes on a dual identity. One cannot simply fly the painting from atop a flag pole. It is obvious it is not a flag; though it claims to be both in title and representation. One may ask, are those claims enough to create a suspension of disbelief? The blatant abstraction can be taken for realism simply by asserting the claim “it is” by title and representation.

Now consider the “all over” effect of the encaustic generates an interstitial space between the news of the time and the flag; this alludes to mediation of information—covering up. It is an expressionistic way of introducing a modernist mindset into the work. During this time Johns is coming out of Abstract Expressionism, spending much of his time with Robert Rauschenberg.



Jasper Johns
Three Flags
30.875x45.5 inches
Oil on Canvas
1958



Leon Golub
Napalm Flag
Size Unkown
Mixed Media
1974

The flag is a theme Johns returns to again in 1958. Johns creates *Three Flags*²³

which reintroduces the ideas behind *Flag*. As the name suggests, *Three Flags* is

²³ (Johns, Three Flags)

²⁴ (Golub)

comprised of three flags that appear to be stacked on top of one another. The image of the flag decreases in size as the images progress toward the viewer. One can decipher it is a two-dimensional composition with a three-dimensional attitude. It boasts itself as a sculpture.

The works created by Johns appear as clean and iconic flags. Leon Golub's work addresses the same symbol with a different effect. He too uses the flag as a subject for his work, though his presentation is neither clean nor ironic. *Napalm Flag*²⁴ incorporates the identity of the flag through representation of pattern. It is smeared with blood, it is burned and scratched. The colors of the composition are red, black, grey, white and a reddish-brown. The strokes are expressionistic. That is the irony within this piece, as Golub rallied against the Abstract Expressionists and identified as an activist. This piece was painted during the height of the Vietnam War. Golub had spent time in World War II, this directly informed his work. *Napalm Flag* is subversive, dirty, honest and horrifyingly brutal. He is representing the flag in the turmoil of war entrenched with death and despair. Golub and Johns are both presenting the same symbol with contrasting representations.



Black Panther Flag
1966

Flags as symbols can carry a significant amount of authority in various forms. The *Black Panther flag*²⁵ is a reminder of the influence a symbol can manifest. The

²⁵ (Black Panther Flag)

Black Panther Flag is similar to the American flag in its representation of symbol and the weight the language of the symbol bears. *The Black Panther Flag* is emblematic of the black power movement in the 1960's. At first, the party formed to patrol neighborhoods and in an attempt to curb police brutality while developing various social programs for the community. The FBI deemed the Black Panthers an internal threat to the national security of the United States. A symbol which originally intended to empower its members is now decontextualized to be perceived as offensive, threatening and violent to the U.S. This led to a power struggle between the government and the Black Panthers.



Scott Tyler
What is the Proper Way to Display a U.S. Flag?
80x28x60 inches
Installation
American Flag, Shelf, Guest Book, Pen and Gelatin Print
Art Institute, Chicago. 1988

It is interesting how a simple image or representation of a symbol can provoke such emotional responses. There are opposing parties demanding power and control over the proper display of an object. The entitlement to the object is personally authorized by association. The intent of the artist is irrelevant once the object, the flag in this case, becomes part of public space. Scott Tyler, also known as “Dread Scott,” creates, *What is*

²⁶ (Scott)

*the Proper Way to Display a U.S. Flag?*²⁶ This is put into an exhibition at the Art Institute in Chicago as part of his BFA thesis show in 1989. It is comprised of objects, with the floor covered by an American flag. This force the participant to step on the flag in order to record their thoughts about the right way to display the U.S. flag in the book provided. This generated protests during the show, beginning at the Art Institute and going straight to the court system. The conservative side claims it is illegal to display the flag on the floor. Tyler maintains his claim that the “flag is a symbol of oppression to millions around the world.”²⁷ Furthermore, he upholds his first amendment right to freedom of expression in order to oppose the intended censors. Despite the public’s reaction, the work remained on display until the close of the show.

The emotional response to Tyler's work is regarding constitutional rights. This type of work would not be allowed in other countries. When objects change their perceived context, problems can arise. This project was not authorized by Betsy Ross! The stark difference between this work and the works of Johns and Golub is the use of object and the interruption of its perceived proper context. Johns and Golub present the U.S. flag as subject matter. Tyler uses the United States flag as medium. All of them utilize the same subject matter, unlike Johns and Golub, Tyler and the Black Panthers differentiate themselves within the medium and the context; especially Tyler by utilizing the actual American flag. The examples of opposition relative to use of the flag as a symbol of representation, the Black Panthers and Tyler enter their respective flags into a perception based power struggle. These entitlements of authorship are quite different than the ones discussed earlier.

²⁷ (D'Amato)

Humor, Art and authorship are viable contenders in the world of Art. Authorship becomes highlighted as a common thread employed to subvert the artist's hand. Certain symbols can evoke strong reactions; I chose to utilize humor as an emotional equalizer within my own work. While exploring different studio practices, the methods evolve into global collaborations that challenge the perceived ideas of how art is made and by whom. The projected personification of an object through a comedic lens provides an open forum for symbols and language to be utilized as a medium for Art. These rugs reintroduce the conversations relative to authorship in a globally political and economic arena through collaboration. Without the original exploration of challenging authorship, these issues may not have presented themselves within the work I am making. The utilization of a collaborative corroborator provides space for me to critique my own authorship by outsourcing the work I create while illuminating the idea of globalization through art in a contemporary fashion.

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