

AUTHOR REDUX, NEITHER DEAD NOR DISCOURSE

We Are a Crowd of Others, MadArt Studio, Seattle, September-January, 2016

By Abigail Susik

Foucault's 1969 essay, "What is an Author"—long a staple in theory seminars—may be for many readers the most familiar theoretical statement of what might be called 'authorial intersubjectivity' from the second half of the 20th-century. Perhaps you already know the gist of Foucault's description of the 'author function,' a dense tract which reads in some sections like the small print clauses on an apartment lease? Among other qualifications, the A.F. "does not refer purely and simply to a real individual, since it can give rise simultaneously to several selves, to several subjects— positions that can be occupied by different classes of individuals." This is an airy point in his otherwise brass-tacks critique of the notion of authorial expression. Even as a mere hint of a possibility of expansion out of the strict "death" of the author formula from that late 60s era, this glimpse of the author function as potentially "several selves"— as a much more messy kind of author *deviation* from complacency, solipsism and all things unimaginative— tempts a relieved smile.

If we are to follow Foucault's own notion of "discursive instauration," or forms of discourse so influential that they expand well beyond their own confines, then we can happily place some of our own ten dollar words in Foucault's mouth. Let's assume that in 2016 Foucault would agree that a theory of the author as "several selves" is frankly much more pertinent than said author as merely "dead" or composed entirely of collective "discourse." 2016 cultivates digital avatars, mail order genetic testing, infinite selfies, and active Facebook pages for the deceased. The "author" today may feel more like a host body invaded by a parasite or ghost; a ventriloquism doll operated by the incessant babble of email and social media; or an invented character rambunctiously performing a virtual reality masquerade. Arguably, the digital world has magnified this feeling of authorial multiplicity.

A Case Study in present-day intersubjectivity for your consideration: *We Are a Crowd of Others*, on view at MadArt Studio in Seattle's South Lake Union district between September and January, 2016. This endeavor describes itself in the wonderful newsprint catalogue available in the gallery, as a "forum" and "open studio" for the interaction between various practitioners, participants, conversants, objects, events, performances and projects. *We Are a Crowd of Others* is neither exhibition, artist's season, nor group residency—and this in itself poses a novel, and most welcome, conundrum. The web of contributors to this project is complex relationally and aesthetically, and even more so because their catalogue text privileges a notion of self as radically inhabited, invaded, and persuaded by multiple identities and drives. The artworks and events slated to occur at MadArt in the allotted timeframe also overlap and intertwine in dizzyingly co-dependent and beautifully conversational ways.

Artist Gail Grinnell constructs a massive site specific installation out of yards and yards of dyed spun polyester, the kind used for clothing patterns, in mimicry of the actions and movements embedded in her own mother's sewing practice. After crafting achingly intricate cuttings in muted shades from the spun polyester, in meandering shapes that wander from swirls to skeletal patterns and back, Grinnell drapes the melancholy, lace-like lengths from hooks placed high on the industrial walls of MadArt. Grinnell's son, the Portland-based artist Samuel Wildman, then gathers these fragile strips and incorporates them, on a continuing basis throughout the duration of the project and sometimes with his mother's help, into a monumental funnel-shaped structure, reminiscent of a wasp nest, which swallows most of the gallery space. Next to this astounding entity, Wildman's own sculptural assemblage, more intimately-scaled and made out of salvaged wood, liquid nails, and mason jars filled with concrete, ponderously accretes over time. Where Grinnell's form emphasizes the forward-driving pulse of artistic production, the urge to expand, Wildman's pinpoints on the other hand the halting precariousness of construction, the shyness of craft.

The depth of the mother-son rapport emerges in a striking fashion from this paired work, which seems like more of a call-and-response, a dialogic structure of request and expectation— than a traditional collaboration per se. Even Grinnell's own artist statement, hung on a rear wall of the exhibition, was ghostwritten by Wildman, underlining the notion that identity can also be experienced as a series of echoes continually ricocheting between self and other. The interactive sound installation accompanying this artist dialogue exemplifies the haunted nature of self-construction through a synesthetic experience of disembodied voices. As visitors wander through the gallery, recorded murmurings can be heard as well as the real-time discussions of the artists themselves, who continue to work. Speakers placed throughout MadArt's lofty rooms are wired to sonar sensors that activate when bodies approach and halt after they depart. Field recordings of the various events that have already happened during the project cast a mysterious envelope of disconnected language, coaxing a simultaneously eerie and calming atmosphere out of the workshop-like environment.

The 'family' ties embodied in the forum *We Are a Crowd of Others* expands—generously and rapaciously incorporating physical and virtual communities. Eric John Olson's *We Are What Eats Us*, a series of weekly public meals featuring the "Dead Dad Dining Club" harnesses further actants for the group through a host of invited authors invoking their absent, dead-beat or deceased fathers. An array of noted writers from Seattle such as Michelle Peñaloza, Jared Mills and Jane Wong, invoke the disappeared or dud patriarchs via prose and poems narrating fatherly food memories, while guests pilgrimage to MadArt in order to participate in the séance-like readings and reenactments of memorable 'dad' meals from the past. At one November incarnation of the DDD Club with writer Paulette Perhach, pancakes were manically flipped across the rooms onto the plates of hungry attendees, while one pancake, suspended in the time warp of memory, was strapped to the ceiling of MadArt with electrical tape. Both macabre and endearing, memorial and mocking, the DDD events force attendees to become contemplative accomplices in domesticated last-supper scenarios.

The project also includes a number of other manifestations such as dance, a series of *Game of Thrones* screenings with lectures by area scientists,

evenings organized by catastrophe preppers, and poetry/prose readings. *Each Other*, a set of open dance rehearsals and performances by Tia Kramer and Tamin Totzke in the MadArt space, appropriately invoke affect theories like that of empathy and phenomenological ideas of body-memory.

We Are a Crowd of Others gives us some room to breathe, a relief from the burden of the idea of the self, and a distraction from the sober burden of identity-enclosure. Intersubjectivity complicates the dualistic idea of collaboration, suggesting that we never work in a vacuum and the other is always present within us.

Abigail Susik is an art historian based in Oregon who writes about friends, strangers, living, and dead artists.

<http://willamette.edu/cla/arth/faculty/susik/index.html>