

## IDENTITY THEFT

*What have I got  
that makes you want to love me?  
Is it my body  
or someone I might be...  
or somethin' inside me?*

*You better tell me  
tell me  
it's really up to you...*

“Is It My Body” – Alice Cooper (1971)

### Introduction:

In contemporary poetry, the tendency toward the borrowed, the purloined, the sampled, the appropriated, the freecycled, the plagiarized, has not only been substantiated by a late 20th century generation of loosely defined innovative poets, but it has been even more fully realized by the wave of younger poets and artists who are at home with both plundering and with its theoretical frame. What, then, happens to *identity* in this inventory of borrowed sources? Do the sources themselves define our thoughts, ideas, feelings... our *selves*? Does the assemblage, the readymade choices, the composition, define our aesthetic? In sampling, does our “original” text take a regular seat on the bus next to “found” texts? Can we express subjectivity, even personal experience, without necessarily using our *own* personal experience? Are our identities so fused and overwhelmed by corporate marketing that these distinctions are rendered meaningless? In this talk, I hope to pose several questions about plagiarism or recombinant practices. The terms are not synonymous and some I realize are more challenging than

others, but I will be interchanging several of the terms that have been used for this practice, including: plundering, freecycling, sampling, appropriating, pilfering, borrowing, recombining, reframing, plagiarizing.

## **1. Whose Body Is This? Whose Shopping Is This?**

*Alice Cooper* is an early example of pop Glam rock or death-rock that appealed to Post-Vietnam War era, post-hippie American teens. In the early 70s, Alice Cooper, T. Rex, Bowie, and others arrive in drag or glam costume with an easily accessible pop sound and a keen awareness of the music industry. For a 1970s splintered youth, especially in the suburbs, struggling to find footing and identity in a rapidly shifting consumer culture, these bands offered not just a new identity but several new identities all at once. Given the deep-rooted and somewhat uniformed identity of the “hippie” culture, these new alternatives came fast and furious—the vacuum was carefully filled or re-engineered by marketing strategist who foresaw the benefits of emptying one identity and refilling it with multiple identities. As artist Mike Kelley writes: “Glam rock was a music that fully understood the commercial music world and accepted its arena of façade and emptiness, using the image of the drag queen as a sign of its status... David Bowie adopts personas, throws them away at whim, and constantly reinvents himself for the market. He mirrors our culture of planned obsolescence. For consumer culture, it has been suggested, the constantly changing, chameleon persona *represents* empowerment.” Certainly this is the case with Madonna.

The Glam rock sound and image amplified these new complexities in a few trademark identity blurs: boy-man, man-alien, boy-child, boy-girl. These open explorations of *sexual identity* marked a significant shift from the 60s *sexual revolution*; a shift that was central to the Glam rock ethos. These teenagers became comfortable with changing, chameleon personas, which continues today to be a boon for advertisers and marketers—a company could appeal to several identities within one consumer. It is in this moment, this environment, where the binary model of self-other seems to break down, and where appropriated personas begin. “Today I am FUBU; tomorrow I’m all about Burberry”.

By the mid 1970s, marketing strategists, corporate advertisers, mall designers, muzak programmers, etc., had become so astute in luring parts of our unconscious selves that a new id-driven variety of teen alienation surfaced (i.e. buying clothes for the many different “yous”). Where the super-ego (in this Freudian fable) once moderated the desires of the id, now the super-ego houses multiple identities with multiple drives of its own (again, good news for marketing). And to further assist in the obliteration of the super-ego’s control, shopping malls—in but one example—stun-gun us with warmly disorienting muzak, artificial-natural lighting schemes and plant-life, confusing floor plans, illogical parking structures, piped-in aromas, waterfalls, etc., and in this dizzying state, we are ready to shop, to take on the new identities of surfers, mountain climbers, rugby players, rap stars, or French school children.

American teenagers of the 70s and 80s became comfortable with these multiple identities where *the real* comes in many shapes and sizes. In the preceding generation, young people sought *alternatives* to the values that they had inherited, but then one meta-narrative or one system of *authentic* values (*truth, genius, good, evil, etc.*) had replaced an older one. In the consumer culture of late capitalism, the saturation of mass media culture and the relentless machine of corporate advertising had created the kind of cultural simulacra that changed the narrative. As marketers quickly discovered, if the new, young consumer did not know what he or she wanted (salad bars, food courts), the market strategist could continually create new possibilities, fantasies, even new values or simulated values, crafted in board rooms, that exist side-by-side with “real” values. (The new *everyman* prevalence of the credit card at this moment only deepened the grooves on this new path.) As such, for writers and artists coming of age in the 70s and 80s, the notion of multiple identities and appropriated identities is a sort of native language, a natural outgrowth of the multiple personas that have been engineered and then targeted by market strategists.

## **2. American Sincerity *and* Plasticity**

The Baudrillardian embrace of the *plastique* of American ersatz is so complete that the ironic distance that was once common has shifted to a kind of blur in the sincerity-irony divide. The terms and sensibilities of inauthenticity, camp, kitsch, etc. that were once given only marginal territory so as not to disrupt “authentic” art and literature, have become recognized tendencies in all of the arts as a significant expression of American culture in

the past several decades. The hierarchy of value in art between the genuine and the appropriated has been breaking down for decades. The dismantling of these borders between authentic and ironic is already part of our cultural currency. For example, I really like Alice Cooper as a sentimental throwback, and as rock music *and* I find it cheesy and silly *and* interesting as a reference to a particular moment that is an important departure from a more authentic rock. There is both an embrace *and* a critical distance. These plasticities are most successful when the work is only partially absorbed. New contexts offer new meanings. And it is at this intersection where there is, instead, a kind of weaving in and out of the absorbed, which is a departure from radical poetic thinking and praxis even 25 years ago.

### **3. Are we really just talking about collage?**

We have all heard it said many times in the poetry world that there's nothing new about plundering texts—we have examples in collage, found text and even readymade. Firstly, one important distinction to note is that in the practice of using appropriated texts today, the materiality, the found sources, are fore-fronted often in large, unmodified chunks—a paragraph, a page, a whole book. These found materials take on new meanings and new social affronts in their new contexts. The strategy is to reframe works that already exist in new contexts to give them new meanings. This distinction is closer to the one between readymade and collage. Collage brings appropriated material together, via the craft of the artist, to a singular expression invented by the artist. The plagiarist takes a source and reframes it in order to call

attention to its new context, to cull meaning from this shift. Further, the plagiarist explores and restores the instability of language as it stumbles into these new contexts. These new situations instigate uncertainty, which, in turn, instigates cultural exploration and investigation. The choices of how one composes with the found texts, how one conceptualizes these choices, determines the success of this poetry. For poets, this is a new prosody, a new way to think about how we write and read.

Secondly, not every tendency is an identification of something new. Replace make it new with make it relevant. It is worthwhile for poets to explore the prevalence of appropriation in the other arts and in our first world cultures at large. In this tendency toward appropriation, many poets have made the leap to join into a larger discourse with the other arts and with popular culture. As culture makers, we're at a moment of inventory, not invention. We are an age of the recombinant: recombinant bodies, gender, art, culture. In this age of *knowledge* explosion or dissemination, many artists and poets have opted for working with the abundance of material already available rather than contributing more *knowledge* to the overcrowded landscape of originality.

#### **4. Production, Access and Copy**

Plagiarism has historically stood in opposition to the privileging of any text because, for one, it foregrounds the act reframing the text which, in turn, shifts the original meaning of the content therein, and, two, it de-mystifies the privileging of any texts by removing its contents from their spiritual,

ideological, religious or scientific frames. The appropriator sees all objects as equal, as equally up for grabs.

This has a historical basis that might help to enlarge my more recent cultural history of identity theft. Up until the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, cultural production was a slow, laborious affair—literary and otherwise. The writer’s version of the artist’s labor of craft might replace hammers, chisels, and paintbrushes with quills, paper, inks, and printing presses. This slow process guaranteed more control over knowledge. The rare genius and original artist could propagate the myth of the individual artist. Access to these ideals was a rare privilege of class and gender, and, as a special gift of privilege, access needed to be guarded. But with the new technologies in reproduction these traditions began to transform through a new velocity of cultural production. The guarding or control of access became more and more difficult. The parallels to today’s moment in cultural production are obvious. The speed of production and accessibility work in tandem to invite expression for everyone. Whoever has a book of poems, an essay, a drawing, a photo, etc. can post it on the internet today and have it viewed by many. The plagiarist is interested in borrowing the material that is already available not as a null set in retaliation to invention, but as a new way of participating in invention. In the words of the Critical Art Ensemble:

The plagiarist does not simply inject skepticism to help destroy totalitarian systems that stop invention; it participates in invention, and thereby is also productive. The genius of an inventor like Leonardo De Vinci lay in his ability to recombine the then separate systems of biology, mathematics, engineering, and art. He was not so much an originator as a synthesizer.

What, then, is the value, historically, of original, unique art works? In *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger writes convincingly about commodification as the primary drive behind originality. After the invention of photography and the ability to reproduce images, the need (by art businesspeople, curators, academics, etc.) to promote original art is obvious--money. It's more difficult to create a mystique around the copy. The worthlessness of the product in plundered art flies in the face of the precious and valuable original art whose mystification, by market-driven necessity, has limited its accessibility.

Finally, one day when the American culture has been fully saturated with images, ideas, language, etc., all of this information will be electronically laid out before us for our inspection, digestion, processing, and all of us will have access to it, and that day has arrived. It seems to me that for poets, this is an especially significant moment. Poets now have access to the language of seemingly everyone's feelings and ideas from any historical moment. It could be similar to how Pop Art artists benefited from the new vocabulary of images offered by television around 1960. In light of this access, the poet as shaman, as singular keeper and sharer of personal experiences, as the designated medium of messages from the heart, seems more restrictive than ever.



## 6. A New Subjectivity:

*I like the personal, it just doesn't have to be my own*

For the generation of experimental poets first emerging in the 80s and 90s, there has clearly been a desire to engage or re-claim the *personal*. I am interested in the inclusion of subjectivity and personal experience; I just prefer if it isn't my own. Today I have access to an unlimited number of personal utterances and expressions from the *gut*, or the *heart*. Why listen to *my gut* when I could listen to *thousands* of guts? And/or in another paradigm, my *gut* tells me what to include, perceive, conceive, etc.

In *This Window Makes Me Feel*, a book-length single poem, I collected thousands of personal responses that use the word “feel” via Google searches to compose, to some degree, a response to 9/11 without referencing the event itself. I was more interested in documenting the moment *before* the bombing rather than after. And I was not surprised to discover that this collection of hundreds of voices expressing everyday general feelings was far more powerful and had far greater reach than I might've achieved with my own singular *voice*. Even though these responses that I was working with were related to other contexts, either general or specific, they *became* specific in this new context. In fact, for me, these borrowed responses, which are “repeated” in my own construction, are more specific than my own personal *authentic* reaction to the event could have been. One of the ideas that is reiterated in poetry workshops is that personal experience will bring the poet to specificity, a voice, and that is good for poetry. The

opposite is also worth consideration: “If exchange is the criteria of generality, theft and gift are those of repetition. To repeat is to behave in a certain manner, but in relation to something unique or singular which has no equal or equivalent (Deleuze).”