

10 A CONVERSATION WITH JENNIFER A. GONZÁLEZ

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This interview took place via email September through October, 2008.

Octopus: You recently published *Subject to Display: Reframing Race in Contemporary Installation Art*,¹ and you have a forthcoming contribution to *Camera Obscura* titled “The Face and the Public: Race, Secrecy, and Digital Art Practice.” While you now write predominantly on such art “spaces,” your background is in Philosophy (BA, Yale) and History of Consciousness (PhD, UCSC). Could you discuss this trajectory?

González: My first intellectual and philosophical passion was Nietzsche, whose writings were so irreverent and brilliant that I simply wanted to read more. I chose to major in philosophy because I could read similar kinds of texts, focusing on Continental philosophy, particularly German (Frankfurt School) and French (Post-Structuralist) writers. I had a parallel fascination with the visual arts and performance, so I took a number of courses in the film department and the art department. Ironically, I only took one undergraduate course in Art History, the canonical survey at Yale taught by Vincent Scully. I was disappointed with the formalist approach, and not particularly attracted

¹ Jennifer A. González, *Subject to Display: Reframing Race in Contemporary Installation Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008).

to the connoisseurship tradition in art history as a discipline. It wasn't until graduate school in the History of Consciousness program that my interests in philosophical/political questions and art production started to intersect. This was the virtue of an interdisciplinary program.

The challenge with any interdisciplinary program, of course, is to find a way to keep working and secure employment, so as graduate student I decided to “discipline” myself in art history. This transformation came about, in part, because I was offered a teaching position at Rhode Island School of Design in the Art History department and was a critical studies student at the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program. Both of these institutions provided a framework for articulating my interests and scholarship in terms of the fine arts.

Octopus: In your article “The Face and The Public,” you discuss Agamben’s notion of the face as “an opening to communicability,” and contrast this with Franz Fanon’s theory of the (involuntary) condition of epidermalization. Explain the significance of this to your project, and where you situate yourself in this discussion.

González: I am generally suspicious of universalizing claims, or any kind of suggestion that in order for humans to properly participate in communication or public life, they have to erase their own histories, genders, or ethnicities. I am therefore equally suspicious of claims that digital culture or artificial worlds offer this kind of “neutral” public space. It seems worth excerpting from my article below to answer this question more fully:

Agamben suggests, in essence, the utopian possibility of human encounter that relies on a kind of purity of presence, where all else (history, memory, gender, race and class) falls away. Counter-intuitively, for Agamben “the face” is, not the human visage, in its material presence, but rather what he calls an opening to communicability. He writes, “there is a face wherever something reaches the level of exposition and tries to grasp its own being exposed, wherever a being that appears sinks in that appearance and has to find a way out of it. (Thus art can give a face even to an inanimate object...and it may be that nowadays the entire Earth, which has been transformed into a desert by humankind’s blind will, might become one single face.)”² For Agamben, “the face” is a restless power, a threshold, a simultaneity and

² Giorgio Agamben, “The Face,” in *Means Without End: Notes on Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 63.



being-together of the manifold “visages” constituting it; it is the duality of communication and communicability, of potential and act. It seems, therefore, to be both the form and the function of signification. Yet it is also an ontological or existential state. He writes, “in the face I exist with all of my properties (my being brown, tall, pale, proud, emotional...); but this happens without any of these properties essentially identifying me or belonging to me.”³ Agamben wants us to be able to imagine the unique character of each human subject without limiting this uniqueness to surface representations, to the limits of particular resemblances between people, to the frameworks of socially defined characteristics. He not only wants us to be able to imagine this state but also to somehow voluntarily achieve it. He writes in the imperative: “be only your face. Go to the threshold. Do not remain the subject of your properties or faculties, do not stay beneath them; rather, go with them, in them, beyond them.”⁴

[...]

In contrast, Franz Fanon has eloquently theorized the involuntary condition of epidermalization that precisely interrupts the concrete possibility of being only one’s “face” (in Agamben’s sense) because of one’s racially defined, physical “visage.”⁵ Fanon describes the moment when he realized his own “properties” were in fact created by others writing, “below the corporeal schema I had sketched a historico-racial schema. The elements that I used had been provided for me.... by the other, the white man, who had woven me out of a thousand details, anecdotes, stories.”⁶ As Delan Mahendran nicely summarizes, for Fanon “the racial-epidermal schema is the interior horizon of self and others in immediate perceptual experience of the world. The racial epidermal schema impacts a black person’s tacit sense of self. The racial epidermal schema immediately in play is the phenomena of appearing or showing up as black in an anti-black world.”⁷ For those human subjects who are constantly enclosed into properties or faculties by others, Agamben’s call to go with those properties “in them, beyond them” seems not only utopian (literally appropriate for a space that does not exist) but also blind to the conditions by which humans subjects are, indeed, produced through elaborately constructed discourses and relations with other humans. These discourses and relations are designed to prevent precisely this voluntary opening of “the face,” to prevent any movement beyond racial particularity.

Writing before Agamben, Emmanuel Levinas also

³ Agamben, “Without Classes,” in *The Coming Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 98.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 99.

⁵ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove, 1967), 11.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 111.

⁷ Delan Mahendran, “The Facticity of Blackness,” *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge* 5 (Summer 2007): 198.



⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: an essay on exteriority*, trans. Alphonse Lingus (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 194.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 197.

¹⁰ Levinas, "Ethics as First Philosophy," in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Seán Hand (Cambridge, MA: B. Blackwell, 1989), 82.

¹¹ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 197.

¹² *Ibid.*, 193.

elaborated "the face" as a critical site of human ethical encounter. For Levinas, the absolute infinity of the Other, legible in the physical presence of the face, simultaneously manages to appear within and exceed this material frame. Levinas opens his discussion of "Ethics and the Face" in *Totality and Infinity* by stating, "inasmuch as the access to beings concerns vision, it dominates those beings, exercises a power over them."⁸ He goes on to explain how the face is the condition for the visibility of the other as Other, and the origin for the opportunity to enter into speech and discourse. He writes, "the idea of infinity is produced in the opposition of conversation, in sociality. The relation with the face, with the other absolutely other which I cannot contain, the other in this sense infinite, is nonetheless my Idea, a commerce."⁹

We can see parallels with Agamben's theorizing of the face, which is clearly indebted to Levinas, but the latter seems to be more attuned to the involuntary nature of this coming into relation via the face-to-face encounter and to the responsibility and possible fraternity that emerges from this. He writes, "one has to respond to one's right to be, not by referring to some abstract and anonymous law, or judicial entity, but because of one's fear for the Other. My being-in-the-world or my 'place in the sun,' my being at home, have these not also been the usurpation of spaces belonging to the other man whom I have already oppressed or starved, or driven out into a third world; are they not acts of repulsing, excluding, exiling, stripping, killing?"¹⁰ Even with this somber revelation, Levinas is not without hope that the radical and uncontainable Otherness that appears in face-to-face encounters can be maintained "without violence, in peace with this absolute alterity. The resistance of the other does not do violence to me, does not act negatively; it has a positive structure: ethical."¹¹ While Agamben grounds the possibility of ethical encounters through an erasure of difference, Levinas grounds it through difference, writing, "the face resists possession, resists my powers."¹² It is this very resistance that allows us to recognize the infinity of the Other who always exists beyond and in excess of the mechanisms (whether visual or discursive, historical or taxonomic) which we might use to frame or delimit it. More to the point, our own historicity depends upon the Other, our situatedness becomes defined by having to answer to and for histories which we may not have previously conceived as our own.



Octopus: You discuss such artists as Keith Obadike, who proposed to sell his “blackness” on e-Bay to the highest bidder (2001), Keith Piper’s video game called *Caught Like a Nigger in Cyberspace* (1997) that requires the user to pass through a series of “obstacles” toward the promising domain of cyberspace, and the British-Jamaican artist collective Mongrel’s online project *Color Separation* (1997) that offers users the opportunity to encounter masked subjects who are signified as imaginary projections of racial types. You have also written on virtual communities such as Second Life. It is my experience that Second Life is not only a giant red-light district, but predominantly a space of cliché, stereotypes, and of “racial tourism”—of playing the role of the Other without the embodied consequences. What do you see as the possibilities and problems of such social spaces? How do such “agitational” works counter the tendency to commodify and stereotype?

González: Second Life is primarily just one more social space for the enactment and projection of desires. However, scholars have noted that there seems to be a tendency for people to try to create “ideal” selves or “idealized” others in such artificial worlds precisely because it seems possible. So what we see in Second Life and other artificial worlds is a skewed view of the world in at least two respects: first, its membership is hardly representative of actual demographics, thus we are seeing the fantasy world of those participants who have the free time and economic privilege to participate; second, even for that privileged population we are seeing fantasy projections (what people desire to be, have, see, experience) rather than attempts at realism. Race and gender figure in this kind of space as one more fantasy projection that tends to produce simplistic stereotypes (a white person’s image of what it means to be black, a man’s conception of what it might be like to be a woman).

If this is a problem, it is also a possibility. Obviously, not all interactions will be simplistic, and some forms of cross-cultural, or cross-gender identification (however superficial) can have interesting effects not the least of which is the invention of new hybrid subject positions that may end up translating into real world subject formation. Moreover, it is the attempts at realism that are perhaps most interesting precisely because they require users to define themselves and their environments in a self-conscious way.

Sometimes art works or other “agitational” interventions in the



seamlessness of cyberspace provide a healthy antidote to the primary activity—consumption—that takes place there by opening up the space to dissenting views, to uncomfortable encounters, and to counter-stereotypes. Activist projects work best when the user is not expecting to encounter them, such as Keith Obadike’s e-Bay piece or Mongrel’s Natural Selection search engine. In the case of both of these art works, everyday users can stumble upon them and get caught up in the critical framework before recognizing them as either art or activism.

Octopus: I find it revealing that through much of the mainstream broadcast media at the moment we hear the recurring claim that voters still “do not know who he [Barack Obama] is,” which may be due in part to his age, but also reads as a general enigma of “blackness.” You have said that fear is not of difference, but of secrecy—and that skin is not a secret. It seems that this stated discomfort over Obama is that there still seems to be some kind of secrecy, however, behind that surface.

González: Absolutely, I think many people deny their own subtle racisms that arise with a simple discomfort over something that is not only unknown but also unknowable. White voters can’t know what it is like to be black (or mixed-race to be more accurate). Therefore Obama represents difference, but it is a difference that cannot be explained or made to disappear. Therefore it remains a mystery, and for some people produces fear. It also produces speculation on the seemingly “unknown” qualities of Obama, which is central to the Republican’s current campaign tactics. Hopefully, however, this will not prevent him from being elected.

Octopus: You are now involved in the creation of a Visual Studies Program at Santa Cruz. What is the impetus of this? The model? How will this distinguish itself from the History of Consciousness?

González: This will be a very small program, accepting only a handful of students each year to work in areas of faculty expertise. Our model shares an interdisciplinary emphasis on visual culture theory found in other programs such those at Irvine and Rochester, but also takes a broad international perspective particularly because our faculty have substantial collective expertise on non-Western topics, both ancient and contemporary. We also have a critical mass of faculty working on critical race theory in visual culture, and this will be one area

of emphasis. The History of Consciousness department is currently undergoing a major transition with the hire of two new faculty; it is unclear how many of those faculty will do work in film or visual studies. In addition to offering Visual Studies degrees, our graduate program will allow History of Consciousness graduate students to pursue an official “Visual Studies” parenthetical designation for the PhD by taking our classes. We hope the focus of our program will complement other programs in Visual Studies, both in the UC system and nationally. We also have [several] faculty working on critical race theory in visual culture, and this will be one area of emphasis.

Octopus: As you know, the theme of this volume of *Octopus* is “surface,” which is clearly related to “the face,” as well as race and digital art, and perhaps inversely, to secrecy—topics in your current writing. Do you have any concluding thoughts on the relevance of this notion, either in terms of your own work, or to visual studies?

González: Typically, the notion of surface implies its opposite—depth. A surface is pejoratively marked as superficial or apparent rather than real, trivial rather than significant, dissimulating rather than truthful. But “surface” is also a verb describing the process of producing or bringing about a transformation: to surface is to finish or polish, to give a texture or smoothness to something, to create its outer appearance. When it is interesting, Visual Studies is not an examination simply of the surface of things as material phenomena, but the study of the conditions for, and outcomes of, specific acts of “surfacing.” Digital art and especially artificial worlds are presented to us as so many “fake” surfaces for our fantasy projections. What I am interested in exploring is the larger set of social and political conditions for these projections, and the resources made available to users for the production of new surfaces. When we consider racial passing, for example, we grasp that the “surface” is not the inverse of the secret, but is precisely the secret itself—a secret that must be made and remade again in each moment, adding a finish or polish to masks of difference or sameness. In other cases, race survives as a discourse that aggressively “resurfaces” a set of bodies so that they signify involuntarily as different. To surface is also to rise out of the depths, to cause to appear, to come up for air. In this respect I find the notion of “surface” productive when considering “the face” as a site of social or ethical encounter



that includes the moment at which the subject might be in the process of enunciation or expression, of coming up for air. We might then ask, under what political and discursive conditions is it possible for the subject, that is any particular subject, to “surface,” to breathe?

