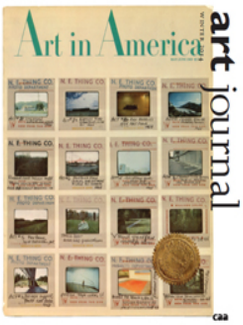

Art Journal

ISSN: 0004-3249 (Print) 2325-5307 (Online) Journal homepage: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rcaj20

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To cite this article: Antoinette LaFarge (2014) Social Proxies and Real-World Avatars: Impersonation as a Mode of Capitalist Production, Art Journal, 73:4, 64-71, DOI: 10.1080/00043249.2014.1036613

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00043249.2014.1036613

Published online: 30 Apr 2015.

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Antoinette LaFarge

Social Proxies and Real-World Avatars: Impersonation as a Mode of Capitalist Production

Artist as Manager

In today's art world, the artist's primary job is to manage her career. That we now take this for granted is quite sad but represents a logical development under late capitalism, the outcome of a series of shifts that have taken artists from skilled artisans to white-collar workers, and their métier from a trade to a business.[1] For the artists, it creates massive cognitive dissonance to try to consider themselves primarily as producers and only secondarily as marketers when that approach will do little but leave them on the sidelines. But even attempting to manage art as a business is productive of a certain psychosis, since there is likely no real market for their work unless they are fortunate enough to be part of art's own 1 percent. As an increasingly vocal cadre of art critics and artists critical of the current state of the art world—Andrea Fraser, Boris Groys, Donald Kuspit, Robert Hughes, and others[2]—have noted, the contemporary art market reflects a shift seen elsewhere toward an economy of information, one that values marketing and selling and status-mongering over object production and distribution. In a 2007 article in the journal *Aesthetica*, Kuspit writes: "Art has never been independent of money, but now it has become a dependency of money."[3] Traditionally, the rich have bought art so that they could align themselves with its perceived spiritual, moral, or aesthetic values. What Kuspit and others are arguing is that art is no longer bought for such reasons, but only for its perceived financial value; art is now "a species of money," an aestheticized currency. Buying art is akin to exchanging our ugly American greenbacks for those elegant Euro notes—a currency transaction rather than a merchandising transaction.

As a result, what was once an industry with a wide range of production modes and practices has congealed into a two-tier system; as Fraser puts it, "The art world itself has developed into a prime example of a winner-take-all market."[4] At the winners' end is a lucrative big-business segment revolving around high-volume production, heroic-scale work, large flows of money, and international celebrity. This is the world of record auction-house sales, investor-collectors, biennials, early-career retrospectives, and Art Basel. At the low end is a surplus of practitioners—the working class of the art world—whose competition and lack of visibility serve to keep prices radically depressed. This is the world of community galleries, art communes, group shows, residencies, and portfolio websites—diverse in aesethetics but not in these artists' economic situation.[5] What has largely gotten squeezed out of this bifurcated market is the middle rank of artists who used to be able to earn a decent living from their art without being internationally famous. Effectively pushed into the bottom tier, these artists either get by on a second income (such as from teaching) or leave the field altogether. Also disappearing is any real belief in porousness between the tiers: it looks more and more as if artists have to be quickly bumped into the top tier or miss their chance at it altogether, rather than working their way up over an entire career. Hence the rise of career management as the artist's main occupation.

In an economy in which art is fabricated as money, the successful artist is essentially a kind of financial manager: someone whose job is to keep the transactions flowing while representing the brand. This requires the offloading of as

1. The offloading of direct labor has always been one of the hallmarks of what we now call professions. The cultural system in which I am embedded is dedicated in part to creating and enforcing a specific identity: professional artist. Graduate art programs such as the one I teach in are complicit in the system since they help to enforce the unwritten code that all "real" artists today must have MFA or (increasingly) PhD degrees. One cannot then turn around and say that this year's phenomenon—say, Damien Hirst—is not a real artist; after all, he has the degree. It becomes harder to criticize the work when the credentials are correct; it is a complicating factor. There is more to be said on this point, following a line of thinking that leads from Walter Benjamin through Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno to Bruno Latour and others, but this is not the place to do so.
2. See for example Andrea Fraser, "L'1% C'est Moi," *Texte zur Kunst* 83 (September 2011): 114–27; Boris Groys, "Art and Money," 2011, *e-flux* online, at www.e-flux.com/journal/art-and-money-2/, as of February 23, 2015; and Donald Kuspit, "Art Values or Money Values?" 2007, at www.artnet.com/magazineus/features/kuspit/kuspit3-6-07.asp, as of February 23, 2015. Robert Hughes, *The Mona Lisa Curse*, BBC TV Channel 4, September 18, 2008, is a scathing critique of the money-driven contemporary art world. Excerpts can be seen on YouTube.
3. Kuspit. The quoted term later in this paragraph is also from Kuspit.
4. Fraser, 118.
5. I'm leaving out of consideration the enormous sector of the art world that is generally considered "commercial" as opposed to "fine" art: the world of illustrators, commercial photographers, the online community Deviant Art, the marketplace site Etsy, and niche art (Western art, steampunk, and so forth). Most of these artists are also in the lower income tier.

Offloading Art Labor

Form of Production	Direct Agents	Indirect Agents
fabrication	studio assistants technical specialists students volunteers	forgers fakers
distribution	personal agents gallerists dealers online stores	curators collectors (private, corporate) other buyers, resellers galleries, museums auction houses biennials, festivals, competitions
branding	personal agents PR and design firms hired writers hired curators personal websites, blogs	independent critics independent curators collectors

Table showing the various ways in which contemporary artists offload labor through both direct agents (largely or entirely under their control) and indirect agents (who operate with more autonomy). Although for simplicity's sake all of this labor is sorted into three major forms of production, in actuality there is considerable overlap among these areas. (table © the author)

much labor as possible throughout the stages of fabrication, distribution, and branding. For each activity, artists use different kinds of agents and their associated institutions as labor surrogates, either directly or indirectly.[6] As nearly everything in the production of art has become potentially outsourceable, there is a corresponding reduction in scope for the single most fetishized aspect of art: the play of the handmade, the touch of genius, the aura of the unique object. Yet there remains one notable exception to this historical process of alienation: artists are still expected to represent themselves as unique human beings. That is, only the artist can appear as the artist at a gallery opening, a biennial, or an interview. Others can speak for her (as agents), but no one can speak as her. So it follows that artists themselves are increasingly circulated as a kind of meta-commodity. As Roger Conover, an executive editor at MIT Press, points out, "It has become ubiquitous for institutions—and that means museums and biennials and art fairs as well as publications and universities—to assimilate artists' utterances, eating habits, travel schedules, shopping preferences, and so forth into the everyday life of the institution, domesticating the artist's routine into its own, into curatorially sponsored breakfasts, coffee breaks, road trips, chats, dressing room talks, and public conversations. . . . They've become as much a part of the programming content of museums, in fact, as exhibitions themselves."[7]

Of Proxies and Avatars

Following Walter Benjamin's thinking about the way things gain value when they are difficult or expensive to reproduce, one can argue that the theoretically irreproducible physical presence of the artist is the last bastion of Benjaminic aura. But what if artists could offload this last remaining piece of labor as well? What if they could expand their artistic practice—and especially their social

6. Here I am deliberately conflating both direct and indirect uses of "other" labor. While curators are generally not hired directly by the artist, for example, the labor they do is so essential that in their absence the artist would otherwise have to take care of it herself. Indeed, in the absence of curators—for instance, among circles of upcoming artists—the curatorial activity does tend to fall back on the artists themselves. I also don't have space here to address the degree to which "artist-curator" has become a new professional specialization within art itself. The recent rise of this role has many causes, but I would just observe that one of these might be an insufficiency in numbers of curators with respect to numbers of artists, which again brings us back to the labor problem.
7. Ulrike Müller with Roger Conover, video of conversation at the Center for Advanced Visual Studies, MIT, July 13, 2009, at http://techtv.mit.edu/videos/3343-ulrike-mller-with-roger-conover?, as of February 23, 2015.

effectiveness—through what might be termed a real-world avatar or social proxy?

Imagine if you will a person who could improvise an artist's public self to the highest possible degree of accuracy. I'll take myself as an example: this other "Antoinette LaFarge" would be able to represent my artistic positions ad hoc in professional situations.[8] For this to work, I would need a professional actor: someone with a deep understanding of character and of the performative nature of social situations, and with a trained intelligence in improvisation. I would need to work with this person so that she commanded my aesthetic vocabulary, my stories, my tricks of speech. It would be as if I were there myself, in every respect except the physical. It would be a fabricated self in the same sense as a Louise Bourgeois sculpture is a fabricated object.

Our consensus terms for this kind of arrangement have heretofore been pejorative words such as "impostor" and "con man," signaling that "speaking-as" is strictly illegitimate. So for a more neutral term I am going to lean on "proxy" since it implies a direct substitution, as in the term "proxy marriage."[9] But the closest analogy comes from the situation that has developed in networked environments like the Internet, where our virtual avatars now roam in their millions.

The use of the term avatar to refer to the graphical representation of a user in a virtual environment is now well into its fourth decade.[10] As immersive environments have grown in popularity, the avatar has come to be understood as more than just a visual representation: it is something that has agency.[11] For the most part, it has limited agency: avatars act as a direct result of our initiating actions, such as hand movements on a joystick. But in social settings—such as chat rooms or the online virtual community Second Life—it is common to identify an avatar as "me" rather than as "my agent." This signals that the users perceive a fuller agency than really exists, one that amounts to an equivalence with the self. And this close identification holds, despite an almost complete lack of verifiability in most situations.[12] Moreover, any number of avatars have been programmed to continue acting in limited ways once the hand is off the joystick, creating a fully disembodied form of agency.

This fact of life begs further questions: Why should we have this power only in the virtual realm? What if we could have our own real-world avatars or social proxies? What would be the benefits, what the drawbacks, and how would such a proxy function within the economics of contemporary art?

Pseudonymity and Multiple Selves

If I were to multiply myself by creating a social proxy, through this act of professional self-cloning I would theoretically be able to multiply my agency in the world. For example, I could send my proxy to a conference while "I" was schmoozing a museum curator over lunch somewhere else. In the simplest sense, it would be a utilitarian move to offload the last remaining piece of direct art labor, thus presumably increasing my chances of success in the art market.[13] But in actual fact, social proxies turn out to be much more complicated than just another kind of hired hand. To see why, it helps to begin by examining a more familiar strategy that artists have long used to multiply themselves: the pseudonym. Made-up names are used by artists to conceal their actual identity for all sorts of reasons; for instance, avoidance of gender bias.[14] In the West, pseudonyms

8. Obviously, there is no magic to the number two when it comes to a real-world proxy; two is theoretically (though not practically) the same as ten or one hundred.

9. In a proxy marriage ceremony, one person acts as another, speaking the legally binding words that the other person would speak if she were present. Similarly, power of attorney is a proxy legal device.

10. One notable early use of the term in this sense was in the 1985 computer game Ultima IV: Quest of the Avatar, in which a major goal for the player was to become an avatar, or spiritually advanced person. At this point, the root Hindu ideas of spiritual growth and reincarnation were still dominant. However, as this term evolved in computer lingo, it initially lost the sense of agency implicit in the original Hindu idea of divine incarnation and became shorthand for the graphical representation itself. From my own experience in various online environments, I'd say that "toon" is now increasingly used where the emphasis is on representation— for instance, the crude user icons that bespeckle online forums— and "avatar" or "avvi" where there is a sense of agency. But as the fuzzy use of these terms indicates, there is still much confusion between representation and agency in online environments.

11. The avatar is also understood as a virtual object and therefore a creation like any other made object. It is an embodiment-object: standing in for both the user's body in a realm where the physical body has no direct agency, and for the actions undertaken in that realm (agency). This can be clearly seen, for example, in the way that James Cameron's 2009 film *Avatar* positioned avatars as Na'vi-human hybrid bodies remote-controlled by humans. Similarly, a social proxy in real space would be an embodiment-object. In the case of the social proxy, however, the proxy can do more on its own; for example, it would be able to initiate action, which avatars rarely do. The science fiction writer Neal Stephenson helped to popularize this idea of the avatar as a virtual body in his novel *Snow Crash*, in which the term "avatar" denotes a human inhabitant of his virtual reality called the Metaverse, which itself is a lineal descendant of William Gibson's cyberspace.

12. Certainly video chat, webcams, and the like offer some assurance regarding identity, but I think it is clear that a great draw for social interaction will continue to be immersive worlds with computer-generated avatars—that is, precisely those situations in which some aspects of one's usual physical and social identity can be concealed.

13. In the terms proposed by the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, it would be a way of maximizing my social, intellectual, and symbolic capital. See Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987). Bourdieu's social capital includes networks and other forms of social connectivity that function to increase our productivity, like metaphysical tools. So a social proxy can be understood as a form of social capital for the originating individual and possibly for the proxy as well. This social capital is accumulated and exerted both within the two-person network of artist and proxy, and within the

Types of Naming

Pseudonymity		Allonymity	
Mary Anne Evans 'George Eliot'	**one body**	Vermeer	**body 1 (Vermeer)** **body 2 (Van Meegeren)**
'Shunro' 'Hokusai'	**one body**	Millard Kaufman	**body 1 (Millard Kaufman)** **body 2 (Dalton Trumbo)**
'Ellery Queen'	**Daniel Nathan** **Manford Lepofsky**	Antoinette LaFarge	**body 1 (Antoinette LaFarge)** **body 2 (proxy)**

Table showing both common and relatively rare forms of pseudonymic and allonymic agency among artists and writers (table © the author)

are common in literature, film, and theater, and comparatively rare among musicians and visual artists. In Japan, by contrast, it is common for a visual artist to choose a new *go*, or art-name, when the work changes.[15]

In the typical case of a pen name, the name is multiplied around a single body: Mary Anne Evans and George Eliot point to the same physical self.[16] This strategy protects one identity under cover of another, fictional one. In the case I am hypothesizing, however, the body would be multiplied around a single name: two physical people, one "Antoinette LaFarge." A social proxy obscures the original body or person, but by multiplication rather than concealment. If there are two or more Antoinette LaFarges in the world, which one wrote this paper?

In other words, a social proxy functions as an allonymic double. An allonym is an assumed name that is not fictional, but is the name of a real person. When an allonym is used without permission, and in furtherance of socially condemned objectives, we find ourselves in the terrain of impersonation[17] and forgery—Han Van Meegeren using the name Vermeer for part of his production, f or example.[18] Used with permission, we have the situation that existed in the blacklist period of the 1950s, when a few Hollywood screenwriters like Millard Kaufman temporarily lent their own names to scripts by their blacklisted friends (e.g., Dalton Trumbo), in order to assure them of some income in those hard times.[19] But note that none of these allonymic cases are considered universally legitimate or desirable; and this is because of our received idea that identity is connected indissolubly to body; that identity cannot and should not be shared between two bodies.[20]

Impersonation and Performance

Let us suppose that I have in fact chosen to deploy my own allonymic double, and she wrote the essay you are now reading under "my" name. In this hypothetical scenario, I am an actor hired to improvise Antoinette LaFarge in public. In order to carry this off, I have spent many hours in her company, learning about her and rehearsing her way of being in the world. We have worked on everything from the nuances of her ideas to her vocabulary and her physical mannerisms, her vocal intonations, and her wardrobe. I have learned about her upbringing and her family, her education and her travels. I know her likes and dislikes, her

more extensive networks within which the proxy is deployed. Theoretically, the social proxy can be a way to leverage and increase the symbolic capital of reputation as a public artist, especially for someone who is isolated by geography or other obstacles, such as mobility limitations. The way a social proxy actually operates, however, would depend very much on the conditions of reception.

14. Other reasons include personal safety, conformation to social norms, marketing strategy, and artistic consistency. For example: avoiding arrest for controversial writings, circumventing or exploiting gender bias (science fiction typically sells better when it is authored by men, romance novels when authored by women), and simplifying ghostwriting of a series. Especially well known among film buffs is the use of the pseudonym Alan Smithee by directors who don't want to be associated with a finished film. In a special category is the use of pseudonyms by writers to mark a significant stylistic shift; an extreme example of this is the British writer John Creasey, who published over six hundred books under twenty-eight pseudonyms.

15. For example, Hokusai used over thirty *go* in the course of his long life—an exceptionally large number—and the works that Westerners know him best for, such as his views of Mount Fuji, were actually created under some of his earlier identities.

16. I am stressing the idea of the physical body as the site of identity so as to avoid some issues related to the word "person." Person is a legal not a natural concept: we stipulate that X is a person. Likewise, we stipulate that the corporation is a legal person.

17. Some forms of impersonation are not allonymic but simply pseudonymic; or they may be neither, as in the case of people who keep their own names but claim professions not their own.

18. One might call the social proxy an authorized forgery, if that is not too oxymoronic. As I argued

friends, her heroes, her favorite foods, her way of telling a story. If this were a film you would say: She *is* Antoinette.

But of course, this is not a film. And so I ask this: If I were not actually Antoinette LaFarge, what would be happening here? Is this an art project, or an asynchronous performance—neatly framed and thus marked off from the rest of the world—or simply a different way of being in the world? Is this an impersonation, or a hoax, or something else entirely? A new stage in the professionalization of art called for by the demands of late capitalism, or a mockery thereof?

Let me start with the question of impersonation. An impersonator is usually defined as someone who imitates another, rather than someone who acts as another. The emphasis is on the mimicry rather than the agency, and indeed the agency is often severely limited.[21] So in one sense it would be an authorized impersonation if I were someone Antoinette had approved to write this paper in my/her/our name. But impersonations are all about the boundary-between: either that boundary is concealed (as in the case of con artists), or it is exploited (as in the case of celebrity impersonators, such as all the Elvises). To speak as an impersonator or as an agent is always to maintain a boundary and insist on difference. And I, who may be Antoinette, do not want to insist on the difference—far from it.

Of course "I" could walk up to the podium at a conference and say something like: "Good morning, I'm here to perform 'Antoinette' and give this paper because she is busy elsewhere." That would be a kind of impersonation and would certainly fit the mode of artist-as-manager that I outlined at the start of this paper—the person who organizes someone else to do work whose rewards she then claims as her own. But it turns out that working with a proxy is much more complicated and much more interesting. Although I started out seriously thinking that the social proxy was the logical next step for the artist-manager—and although it would certainly be possible to exploit the proxy as crudely as any other kind of minion—I have discovered that there are psychological and ethical dimensions to the proxy project that run directly counter to the present fashion for careerism. Possibly it is best understood in oxymoronic fashion, as a mode of capitalist art production but with a relational aesthetic.

The Proxy Project

It should be clear by now I have already begun working on the proxy project I am discussing, under the title *World-Integrated Social Proxy (WISP)*.[22] "I" have deployed my first proxy several times in public situations, including at the College Art Association Annual Conference in 2010, where she gave a talk based on an early version of this essay, which "I" have subsequently rewritten. And I can tell you that the "Antoinette LaFarge" constructed from the interaction between me and my proxy—who is otherwise and elsewhere an actor, Laura Kachergus—and from our interactions with the rest of the world, is not quite owned by either of us. What we are creating and exploring together is more like a field of potential relationship than an identity in the classic sense. Nor is it quite like a traditionally goal-driven activity such as a performance or an impersonation. I would say that performing "professional artist" through and with a proxy requires a different set of negotiations than performing it in my own body. And this is because the proxy

in an earlier paper, Marcel Duchamp used yet another related strategy. On his readymades, the pseudonym again does not correspond to the maker, but in reverse. The forger makes an object but signs it with another name; Duchamp did not make the objects, but signed them with his own name. LaFarge, "Marcel Duchamp and the Museum of Forgery," *Tout-Fait* 4, no. 2 (2002), at www.toutfait.com/online_journal_details.php?postid=1359&keyword=Lafarge, as of February 23, 2015.

19. Pseudonymic productions of all kinds are a subset of pseudepigraphy, that is to say, works for which an unfounded or unproven authorship claim is made. Pseudepigraphy ("false inscription") is a term most often deployed in historical and religious studies with respect to attempts to unravel the authorship of ancient or controversial documents such as the Biblical Psalms of Solomon or the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Sometimes the claim to authorship appears within the original text or accompanies its transmission and becomes accepted in tradition; sometimes the claim is made well after the fact. As with forgeries, the ascription to author X may represent a desire to affiliate with that person's knowledge or reputation. A social proxy project of the kind I am hypothesizing here departs from other pseudepigraphic forms in that it is not unknown person X who is claiming author A's name; it is author A who is extending the use of her name to person X. This accords with the common idea that we do (and ought to) control our own names.

20. Although a shared or group identity can be constructed where there are two or more people—for example the mystery writer "Ellery Queen," who was actually Daniel Nathan collaborating with his cousin Manford Lepofsky—within that shared identity are always found two individuals apart from the shared, fictional self. That is, in all these cases with which I am familiar, the practice is pseudonymic, not allonymic.

21. Impersonators viewed as illegitimate, such as con artists, often take on greater agency than, say, celebrity impersonators. Impersonation is a human-centered form of dissimulation that is a subcategory of a larger field of substitutions, in which A passes as B. Other examples include the ancient naval practice of flying a false flag in wartime; telemarketers who pretend to be market researchers; and the aptly named "astroturfing," a contemporary form of PR that is disguised to appear as a grass-roots phenomenon (i.e., it is an artificial grass-roots phenomenon).

22. I want to thank both my first proxy, the marvelous Laura Kachergus, for venturing into this terrain with me, and the director Robert Allen, who collaborated closely with me on training a proxy. Without them this project would never have passed from the conceptual to the actual, and it is in the actualization stage that it became really interesting as a lived experience.

The first "Antoinette LaFarge" proxy takes part in a discussion at the 2009 Digital Arts and Culture Conference at the University of California, Irvine, where the *W.I.S.P.* project debuted. To prepare for this event, the actor Laura Kachergus—shown here wearing a nametag identifying her as Antoinette LaFarge—worked closely with the author as well as with her collaborator, the theater director Robert Allen. (photograph by Robert Allen, © Antoinette LaFarge)

who takes on Antoinette LaFargeness begins to own that identity, to share in it. She has many of the same affordances, responsibilities, and risks that "I" do. It becomes a shared enterprise, an unusual form of collaboration.

Another way to look at it is as a form of what I have defined elsewhere as "fictive art," which is to say: art that actualizes its fictional elements, either through the creation of objects, or through other material means.[23] With the proxy project, I am actualizing the at-least-partly fictional being "Antoinette LaFarge" through a second body.

This shared identity also operates to undo the conditioning that leads us to see identity as either holistic or fragmentary, but in either case, not dissociable from a single body. It is an experiment in dehabituation. Much of our life takes place in overlapping fields of social relations that operate to normalize our behavior and constrain our knowledge—in short, to habituate us.[24] As is evident in the table on page 71, there have been many attempts to devise formulations that adequately cover this situation. Michel Foucault underlines that these types of states are the result of mutual self-policing through what he calls "technologies of the self."[25]

In this habituated, amnesiac, and machinic world, it is understood that I, a professional artist and educator, will show up at the College Art Association conference neatly dressed and reasonably civil, and will present a well-thought-out paper on a subject relevant to the concerns of my audience. At some later date, I will create an edited version for publication. Thus I maintain professional reputation—that is, unless I choose to become marked as heterodox by contravening one of a thousand unwritten conventions. Such as the requirement that I show up and do the work in my own body.

23. See, for example, LaFarge, "*Eisbergfreistadt*: The Fictive and the Sublime," *Visual Communications Quarterly* 16, no. 1 (2009): 210–41.
24. This formulation is indebted to the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, who extended Mauss's take on *habitus* to focus more on the social relations that produce a body of agreed knowledge.
25. See Michel Foucault, *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, ed. Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, and Patrick H. Hutton (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988).

Examples of Fictive Art

Artist	Project	Forms of Actualization
Nicholas Kahn & Richard Selesnick	*The Circular River*	'anthropological' artefacts, 'historical' photographs and documents, 'personal' journal
Joan Fontcuberta	*Sputnik*	'historical' photographs, documents, and objects
Lenore Malen	*New Society for Universal Harmony*	fictive institution, 'historical' photographs, 'nonfiction' essay
0100101110101101.org	*Darko Maver*	fictive artist and that artist's 'artworks' and artefacts
Antoinette LaFarge	*World-Integrated Social Proxy (WISP)*	semi-mythologized artist and that artist's agency in the world

Examples of fictive art detailing some of the ways by which artists attempt to convert fiction to fact through the production of "evidentiary" objects (table © the author)

The spiritual teacher G. I. Gurdjieff called the process of awakening from the machinic state "the Work."[26] As in many spiritual and most secular traditions, the remedy requires labor. There is a presumption that work on the self must be done by the self, on the self (possibly with the help of external agents such as teachers).[27] Some Buddhist meditation practices, for example, are designed to disassociate a person from her sense of self, as a possible route to liberation from the very idea of self.[28] Still, there remains the idea—even among postmodernists—that however we imagine our fragmented selves, those fragments are all emergent within a singular corpus of flesh. This assumption operates even in such radical, physically transformative artistic projects as those of Orlan and Stelarc.

But what if this need not necessarily be true? What if it is an operative illusion, a collective response to our assumed powerlessness over the body-identity connection that we have constructed to seem "natural"? We tend to think of individualization as a fundamental human goal, but we should remember that it is also a necessity imposed on us by the state, which exerts control over our identities to a far greater extent than we usually like to notice.[29] In one sense, despite their transgressive images, both Orlan and Stelarc represent an ideal of state-mandated identity: the person who cannot possibly be confused with any other person on the planet. What if we could get along with shared identities; not easily, perhaps, but productively?

Insofar as this project is successful, it has begun to disassociate me from my identity as Antoinette LaFarge, actively historicizing the "old" Antoinette and requiring me to enact myself both more consciously and with less control. In working with Laura, my first proxy, I often felt like the beta version of myself, which she was tasked to improve; and yet this project entails no notion of my own perfectibility. On the contrary, there is a sense in which having a proxy turns me into the means of production of the new product "Antoinette LaFarge." No longer artist, but self-fabricator. And as I slowly depreciate over time, presumably I could eventually be replaced by my own proxy.[30]

26. The novelist Philip Dick called the awakening "anamnesis," but his writings suggest that this could happen spontaneously, like grace, rather than through any specific set of labors.
27. Or with the help of disinhibiting stimuli that vary from person to person, such as the use of random functions or dream elements to change one's relationship to the world.
28. Gurdjieff was something of a proto-postmodern in his recognition that we have no permanent "I": "Each minute, each moment, man is saying or thinking 'I.' And each time his I is different. . . . *Man is a plurality*." Gurdjieff quoted in Erik Davis, *Techgnosis: Myth, Magic, and Mysticism in the Age of Information* (New York: Harmony Books, 1998), 134, emphasis in the original. Gurdjieff's view is probably inflected by Buddhist views of the self as composed of multiple bits, with no singular essence.
29. One has only to consider the ongoing debate over married names, the different obstacles the government sets in the way of name-changing, and the escalating use of biomarkers for identity control. A minor entry in this list of constraints is the legal fiction known as "doing business as," which refers to the practice of conducting business under an assumed name that is not the person or entity's legal name. In the United States, there are some legal requirements associated with DBA, notably a requirement of public notice designed to protect citizens from fraud.
30. I can even imagine something like an identity exchange, in which identity becomes a tradable commodity.

Forms of Habituation

Writer	Term	Definition
anthropologist **Marcel Mauss** (after Émile Durkheim)	**habitus**	tendency of social structures to produce agreement, reproduce themselves, and limit development of new knowledge
sociologist **Pierre Bourdieu**	**habitus**	as above, with greater emphasis on social relations as governing factor
novelist **Philip K. Dick** (after Plotinus)	**'amnesia'**	deadened state of habituality, lack of conscious reflection, obliviousness to true state of things, esp. 'higher' forms; curable by anamnesis
mystic **George Gurdjieff**	**man-machine state**	operating on automatic, without conscious choice or exertion of will

Some of the terms used to discuss human habituation at both the societal and the individual levels (table © the author)

Ever since Marcel Duchamp came along, we have no longer been certain, when looking at an artwork, if the artist made it with her own hands, and that still worries quite a lot of people. Now perhaps we can add this: we might no longer know if the person speaking is the artist herself. Is the artist now a ready-made? Should that worry us too? Certainly, not everyone has been welcoming of my proxy-artist project, and at least one art historian has been deeply offended by it, considering it unprofessional and the worst kind of hoax. But to that way of thinking I would just say this: if my proxy-artist project were a hoax, what magicians call "the reveal" would be the critical aspect of the project, no matter how long delayed.[31] But I have discovered, in the course of seeing this project through, that the key question is not: am I or am I not Antoinette LaFarge?—I who was standing before you, I who am writing this essay. The crucial question turns out to be: am I doing a good job as Antoinette LaFarge?

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31. Examples in art are too numerous to list here; but see for example the activities of the Yes Men, most of what is written about the Museum of Jurassic Technology (with the notable exception of utterances by the museum's own founder, David Wilson), the deployment of the fictive artist Darko Maver by the European art group 0100101110101101.org, and so on.