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ScholarArt Issue 1 Introduction. Subject Positions in Art: A Discussion of the Theory

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Recommended Citation

Baca, April; Hicks, Timothy; and Jones, Cassandra, "ScholarArt Issue 1 Introduction. Subject Positions in Art: A Discussion of the Theory" (2016). *Art 525 Conference Papers*. 12.

<https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/art-history-papers/12>

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Subject Positions in Art: A Discussion of the Theory

What is a subject position? Why do the essays in this special journal issue make reference to the subject positions in art? A subject position is most easily understood through the concept of the S/subject within the context of how subjectivity is presented, viewed, and understood. Accordingly, the use of the capital 'S' and the lowercase 's' functions to express throughout this study of the subject's relationship to power. While the capital 'S' signifies the "sovereign Subject" as given in Foucault's question of "The Subject and Power" the lowercase 's' subject is articulated as the "struggle against the forms of subjection – the submission of subjectivity." [1] The themes examined throughout these essays facilitate discourse on the S/subject within the context of aesthetics, gender, and race in relation to the overarching narrative of power.

Each of the papers presented in this special issue examine varying perspectives on subject positions in relation to works of art. Although the writings are topically different from one another, they remain inherently the same in addressing how the S/subject(s) is construed within and outside of the art object. In this authorial examination of the S/subject, variances in understandings of the S/subject are fluidly exchanged between the role of the artist's relationship with the S/subject and the viewer's engagement and interpretation of the subject's position. As there are a multitude of viewpoints concerning the evaluation of subjects and their positions within (and out of) artistic works, there is a separation and yet eventual suturing of the meaning of subject and position. Viewing both S/subject and position separately will help in facilitating an understanding of the subject's position within the doxa of the community and society of its engagement.

Firstly, the concept of positions, or positioning, has similar parallels to the term 'role(s)' within contemporary and traditional social constructions. The role or position can implicate either a sense of multiple identities and "selves" that a S/subject may have; or in contrast, present a static, fixed, and structurally-formalized subjectivity. These identities are actively constructed through the position that the S/subject's subjectivity is placed in relation to other discursive contexts for the viewer to consider (for example, Althusser's concept of interpellation where all ideologies constitute a subject). [2] As the papers in this issue will illustrate, the position, or identity, that the subject is obligated to take thereby transforms the subject into an artistic representation based on the subjectivity of either the artist or the viewer.

The S/subject's position then engages in a power/knowledge relationship where the former constitutes the latter, decentering the subject through the creation of the artist or the viewer's Otherness. The defining of one category as dominant, or positive, and the Other as lacking and/or inadequate reveals the subject's position under the

“discursive body of power.” The Self/Other binary frequently intersects with other conference topics that span from cultural normativity and fetish, the aesthetic and the political, institutional racism, and woman as Other within a hegemonic male system. Within the context of this conference, each subject’s position and subjectivity remains positioned by the author as the object of study. As such, the position of the author is one in which s/he not only identifies and deconstructs each subject’s position but also the dominant discourse relevant to the source of the subject. The individual social groups and aesthetic deliberations that are defined according to the orthodoxy of dominant discourse has been examined by each of the conference participants. Within their discussions the S/subject’s position in art has been carefully examined, disseminated, and presented for the reader’s reconsideration, yielding a rich dialogue that emerges from this special issue.

The first essay by Cassandra Jones surveys the aestheticism and creative presence of *The Pont Neuf Wrapped*, 1985, by the artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude. A bridge famed by the controversy surrounding its “wrapped” presence in Paris, Jones examines Pont Neuf’s draped concealment alongside the artistic intent and production of this large scale work. Concerns regarding Pont Neuf’s social and political relationships within the scope of environmental art are also undertaken in pair with the history behind its conception. The reader is invited to reconsider their own perceptions of aesthetic value, the natural environment, and the site-specificity of this particular work.

The next essay by Timothy Hicks addresses relational aesthetics and community in Rirkrit Tiravanija’s performative art piece *Untitled (Free)*, 1992. Hicks proposes throughout his study that Tiravanija’s work simultaneously parallels and contradicts Nicholas Bourriaud’s suppositions for relational aesthetics – his refusal to incorporate the politics of engagement with his analysis of the conceptual, minimalistic aesthetic. The context in which Tiravanija’s work is shown underlines Hicks’ argument as the artist incorporates an interactive space that invites participants to utilize the work’s functionality while simultaneously introducing the unacknowledged elements of an indigent service economy.

Ryan Hester’s seminal essay “Defacement of Life” explores the historical and contemporary function of graffiti art as a politicized medium. By utilizing Jean-Michel Basquiat’s painting, *Defacement (The Death of Michael Stewart)*, 1983, Hester elucidates the framework of street art and its contribution to the fight against the ongoing police brutality and racism that black America faces. Hester’s incorporation of both a rich unfolding of Basquiat’s work alongside his personal narrative impassions the activism that outlines Hester’s study.

In “The Reconciliation of Fatness and Beauty in Art” by Jamie Zeffery, the cultural and social boundaries that frame, confine, and define Western female beauty are examined through the positioning of judgment and the consequential phobias of excess, obscenity, and female fatness. Zeffery’s essay stands as an unapologetic manifesto, condemning the fetishization of the fat female body while renegotiating the

perception and bodily currency of the fat female form. Zeffrey's observations on the male gaze and the contemporary re-emergence of heavier female bodies invites a reinvigorated perspective that challenges the gendered social value placed on the idealized female form.

For the final text, "Beyond the Blinds: On Power and Subversion" April Baca investigates the Foucauldian discourse on power structures, relationships, and subversions through the allusions expressed within Diego Velazquez's *Portrait of Innocent X*, 1650 and Francis Bacon's *Study after Velazquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X*, 1953. The framework, context, materiality, subjectivity, and narrative of both paintings are examined through a deconstructive standpoint in Baca's analysis of the hierarchy and structural subversions that Bacon's painting consequently yields. Enquiries into the technology of paint simultaneously serve as a formal study intended to balance the theoretical framework of the S/subject.

Throughout history, numerous presentations of the subject in art have brought attention and insight to various constructions of the S/subject. In each of the papers written, the S/subject positions are outlined and disclosed through both research and personal inflection, using evidence to support a variety of perspectives in regards to the S/subject(s) portrayed. And though these papers are topically diverse with a range of concerns spanning installation, race, societal perceptions, power structures, and gender they are all relatable in dealing with the subject and subjectivity. We hope that the reader is able to see the perspective of the author from the reader's own subject position, effectively engaging with the subject position of the author in his/her own subjective way.

Editors: April Baca, Timothy Hicks, and Cassandra Jones

[1] Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (Summer, 1982), 82.

[2] Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)." In *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, 11. Verso, 1971. Althusser's concept of interpellation is established against the traditional understanding of the subject as "cause and substance", emphasizing instead that individual subjects are principally produced by social forces, rather than being autonomous agents with self-produced identities.