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PARAFUNCTIONAL TENDENCIES

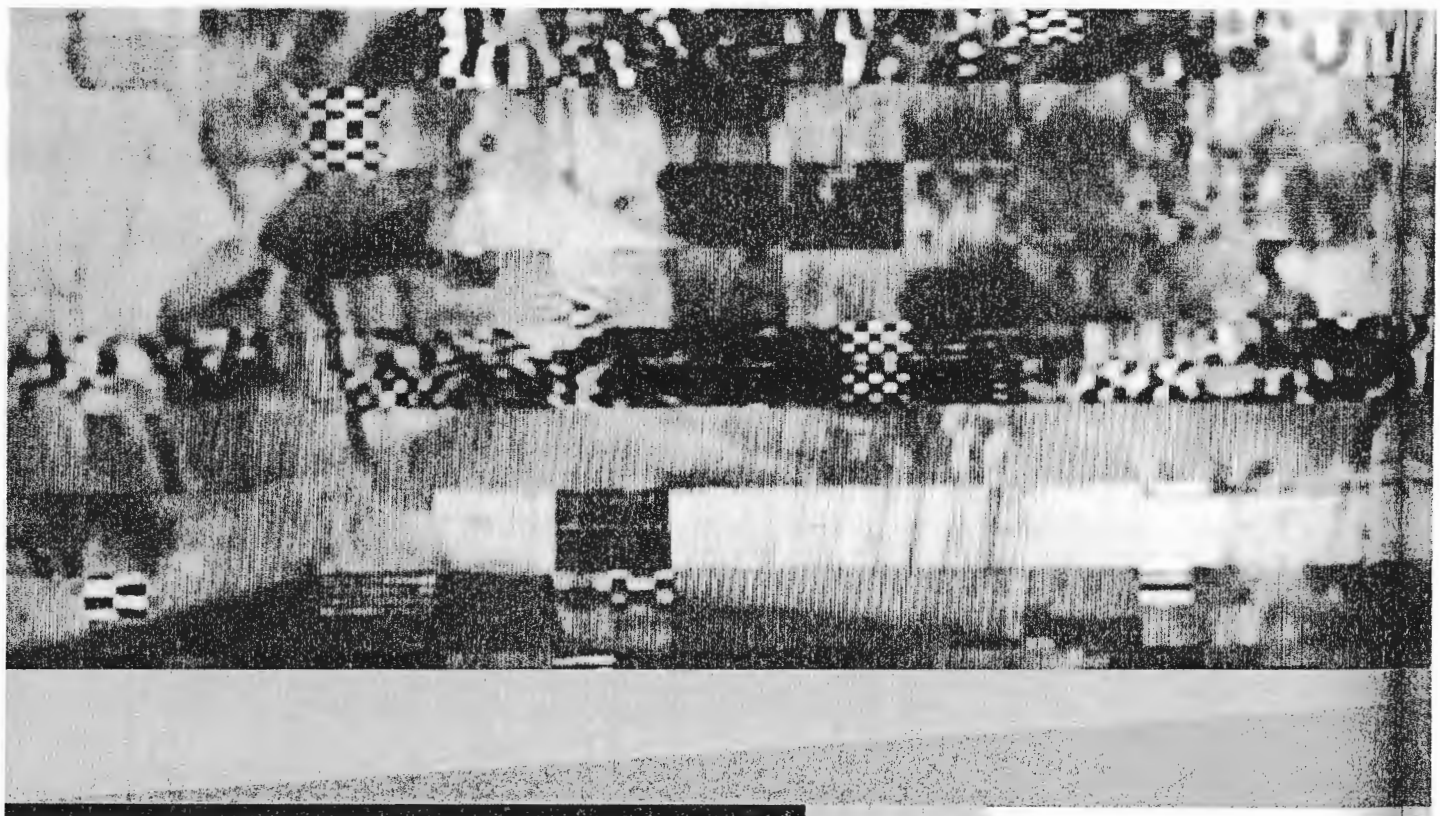
Carrie Lambert-Beatty
in conversation with
Kostis Stafylakis





Your “Make-Believe: Parafiction and Plausibility” paper was published almost a decade ago.¹ In this eminent paper you ask “what happens when artists deceive their audiences?” I think that since the early 90s, parafiction, fictiveness, affirmative mimicry and overidentification became a habitus for a particular strand of cultural and activist labor. In the 90s, fictiveness and subversive affirmation was part of an experimental period of cultural jamming partaking to the politics around issues of globalization while hijacking the newly developed digital networking technologies. The tactical media and the Luther Blissett Project were paramount to that conjecture. It seems to me, though, that the question of fiction and its epistemological repercussions gradually shifted into a category pertaining to the art-field’s own institutional expansion towards a knowledge-based model of artistic production, display and circulation. In the new century, in the biennials and the Documentas, this urge for knowledge materialized into sociological reflection on globality, postcoloniality and, more recently, the occasionally omniferous idea of the Global South. A recent expression of this urge, in the form of a twipperate inhibition, is documenta14’s self-description as “Learning from Athens.” The conquering of knowledge burgeons into a quest for educational alternatives to the institutional knowledge produced in the West. How would you describe the status and role of parafictional truth in relation to this recent cultural and institutional legacy? What is the space for parafictional knowledge now?

Your model of those three phases is really interesting. I might narrate the history a bit differently, but overlapping quite a bit with what you propose. At the time I published that article, although I saw that parafiction was overdetermined—there was no one cause, but a convergence of several historical and art-historical conditions you could see as conditions for different works of art—I did tend to assume its rise paralleled the popularization of the Internet and dated to the late 1990s. This caused me to bracket out some earlier cases that I now think are absolutely crucial. It also gave the phenomenon a different relationship to contemporary art history. That is, if parafiction started at the end of the 1990s, then it is an interesting phenomenon that arises at a particular point within contemporary art. But now I think it has been part of this thing we call “contemporary art” from the beginning. That leads me to describe it differently: parafiction is the way contemporary art takes on the epistemic dimensions of the transformative crises of this period.



In relation to your three phases, I do see something distinct about tactical media, which falls in the middle of your history. But I don't see the "knowledge-based model of artistic production, display and circulation" starting so recently. Maybe it is a U.S. as opposed to European perspective. My story now starts with work that has generally gotten attached to the terms "institutional critique" or "identity politics." But an artist like Fred Wilson, for example, was working on and within knowledge institutions, not just art institutions. James Luna, also; and Coco Fusco and Guillermo-Gómez-Peña in their famous performance of 1992–93, *Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit the West*, or *Couple in the Cage*.

That was the moment of the Columbus Quincentennial, which indigenous activists successfully framed as a moment for political education, creating a watershed moment in terms of the critique of Eurocentrism entering mainstream discourse. And it was a specifically epistemic-political crisis: you have known since kindergarten a basic fact, Columbus discovered America. And now you are asked to see that moment from the perspective of the "discovered." I think of it as a parafictional experience for white America: a deeply uncomfortable reorientation of what and how you know. Just like a museum-goer when she learns that a historical figure in an artist's installation was made up, or that the "undiscovered" natives in the cage have been observing you and your gullibility, or racist assumptions, or discomfort. The first reaction to experiencing a parafiction is usually defensive anger. The question is whether and how you get past that ego-threat. Thirty years later, lots of "white America" obviously hasn't gotten past that one. But with a parafictional art work, some people definitely do that work—you can see it happen. Or feel it happen to yourself.

Let's touch the thorny issues around the ethics of parafictional strategies. You have observed that "post-simulacral parafiction," i.e. parafictional

practices that supersede the mere play with simulacra, symbols and signifiers, is less oriented towards the disappearance of the real, or the critique of reality construction, and akin to a "pragmatics of trust."² The ethical question of parafiction revolves around the experience of fiction as fact by an audience: for more than a moment, something and someone is trusted as true. This is the properly performative attribute of parafictional acts. Parafiction and overidentification seem to respectively embrace the application of deception and/or manipulation in social relations. And, thus, deception becomes less a postmodern critique of reality and more an actual form of communicative/ social networking. Reading your 2009 essay, I see that a Rancierian notion of distribution of the sensible best describes the type of impact that parafiction can have on specific audiences. How can we further define this reality or realness of parafictional relations?

That's so well put! I might say that what's at stake is social relations, as opposed to the status of information itself. There is a representational and a performative dimension to any parafictional work. The concept that helps me the most is Austin's infelicitous or unhappy performative. If some speech acts can be evaluated as true or false, like "the sky is blue," there are also those, like "I bet you a dollar," that don't refer to something accurately or inaccurately; they either work or don't work, effect a change, create a situation, or not. Unhappy performatives occur whenever the circumstances are not right—there isn't the official sanction, or something was wrong about the context (I was drunk when I made that bet! Or, I was playing a character in a play.) In the case of parafictions, where an unhappy performative has temporarily or partially been able to "take," or has taken for some people and not others, I think there can still be a kind of residual efficacy.

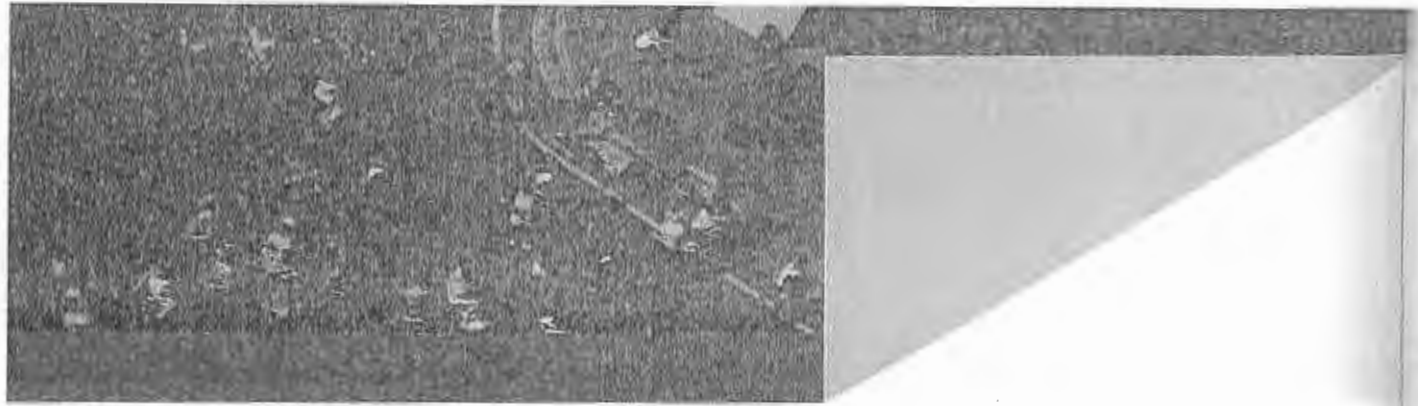


For example, the early piece by Fred Wilson, *My Life as a Dog*, at the Whitney Museum. Wilson met with a group of docents he was going to train so they could give tours of an exhibition. Then he says he will meet them upstairs in the gallery, but when they get there they're left wondering where he is. It soon turns out that he has been standing there all along, only he had changed clothes—into a museum guard's uniform. An amazing and painful example of who can be seen and when. But the performative effect of the kind I mean lies in what happened next. Wilson starts giving the educational lecture on the exhibition for the docents. And so everyone else at the museum that day, everyone passing by, sees this official-looking group of people being taught by a museum guard. Instead of human furniture to edit out of the art experience, museum guards became potential art experts (which of course they often are). Visitors would take that knowledge with them going forward. In terms of who is supposed to have knowledge and who isn't, who can speak and who can't, who is visible and who isn't, something shifted.

When I said parafiction is post-simulacral, I meant it as a shorthand for the idea that the artists I'm looking at are not fundamentally engaged with a problem of signs substituting for the real. It isn't about citationality, or the play of reference. I don't want to overstate the break, but I don't think the point of inventing a character and presenting her to viewers through a display of meticulously fabricated documents and artifacts is to make people realize that history is always a matter of signs and codes and narratives and institutional authority. It's not incompatible with that knowledge, but it's experienced differently and the stakes are different. It's not "just" signs and codes. It's the power of signs and codes. You experience it in your gut, or at least I do: an embodied shift, like an elevator sinking a few inches further than you thought it would. It's disorienting, and often unpleasant, but at least in the cases that interest me, it isn't a hall-of-mirrors delirium. Even when it is less dramatic and there's no clear "reveal," there is an uncertainty created, a lived experience in which the ground sort of shifts under you. You don't drift away, though—in fact you are deposited more firmly in your own, experiential reality. You are not surveying or taking in information; something is happening to you. You are implicated in the epistemic situation. It matters.³

In this way it is exactly the opposite of the period epistemic style described in the discourse on post-truth, in which there's an underlying sense that everyone lies: all news, or science, or history is basically opinion, so you might as well stick with the versions that fit your worldview, or match your identity, or are endorsed by your social group. The problem is not gullibility versus skepticism, it's caring versus not caring, being curious or not. This has implications for education, journalism, and for art: rather than asking how do you make people more skeptical, the question is how do you encourage us to keep trying to know more, better?

And how do you do this when curiosity is commodified? The main way we seek out knowledge is the Internet, and most of the time, that means our knowledge-seeking is being monetized, for someone else. And the money isn't in directing us toward conflicting perspectives or a diversity of sources.



Debates usually scrutinize the ethical impact of parafiction and deception on a certain audience. But how does parafiction affect the parafictioneer? I guess that the case of Aliza Shvarts is really telling. For her graduation piece at Yale, Shvarts released a statement at *Yale Daily News*, suggesting that “for the past year, she performed repeated self-induced miscarriages.” Since her 2008 *Untitled* graduation piece, Shvarts delves into the virtual world of viral panic, academia networks, email ethics and the trajectory from the blogosphere to social media reality. She was nicknamed “abortion artist” by Gawker.com, she was subjected to anti-Semitic and misogynist attacks. Can we see the history of moral panics around Shvarts’ projects as a foreteller of post-truth performativity in recent politics? A feature of the alt-right’s and Trump’s tactic was the arbitrary definition of true and fake, so as to produce utterances of self-approval in the form of self-victimization and conspiratorial myths. In a recent series of works, Shvarts reframes the status of parafiction by asking “how does it feel to be a fiction?” I see that as deliberately thematizing the vulnerability haunting the digital self in today’s political sphere, the convenience in being called this or that, the underside of the illusion of accessibility and digital power.

Well, the moral panic about Shvarts’s piece was pretty much business as usual in terms of the discourse on abortion here. But you’re right, factors emerged in that case that now seem like warning signs: the anti-Semitic trolling, the alt-right web, anti-intellectual, anti-academic sentiment, and the accusation of fakery (which is what she handled so brilliantly). She gave them a story they couldn’t help but take viral. The alt-right was then partial to parafictional tactics itself, by the way, from fake Martin Luther King websites to gotcha “journalism.”

For the 6th Athens Biennale, Shvarts presents a new iteration of *How does it feel to be a fiction?* The piece is a digital performance which simulates the function of an “email worm” virus. A text disseminates through personal email accounts operating through the active consent of participants. Participants receive a newsletter inviting them to participate in a personality test mimicking the Cambridge Analytica methods of data collection and profiling. Shvarts explores rhetorical methods of obtaining trust and consent in digital space. After collecting your data, the program forwards the results of your personality test to every mail address in your personal mailing list. This can only happen once you explicitly and repeatedly consent, and turns you into a product of “scientific” fiction circulating among your acquaintances.

That’s fascinating. The political economy of the Internet as we know it was not inevitable, and it arose in specific ways

in part because of ideology. Early on, as I understand it, a major factor was a residual, 60s-counterculture-type fear of centralized control—Big Brother, the Establishment. Censorship was the great concern. It’s obviously something to be concerned about, and more so in some places than others. But in Silicon Valley this libertarian impulse meshed exactly—and to everyone’s great profit—with neoliberalism in ideology and practice: free-market essentialism and the massive deregulation of finance and communications. And we have this situation where we trade our privacy to corporations in exchange for “free” services and convenience. That’s why the artists and activists associated with the term net.art are so compelling to me right now. They were by definition involved with Internet culture early; they experienced privatization as the theft and enclosure of a public good. In 1997 Rachel Baker does her Tesco Clubcard project, counterfeiting and hijacking a supermarket “loyalty card.” She gets sued, and the corporation’s control over its valuable brand identity—copyright—contrasts with the consumers’ ceding of their own data-identities. In 2000 the group 01.org (Eva and Franco Mattes) started a piece in which they made their entire hard drive available to everyone online in real time—radical file-sharing and identity-sharing, like Jennycam and Napster combined—an experiment in the blurring of information and identity, well before social media made it everyday reality for the rest of us. In 1998 RTMark (who would become the Yes Men) said, “I for one would give up privacy if corporations would.”

It’s interesting that Shvarts’s earlier performance was, essentially, a sacrifice of privacy. (A very high-stakes one, since the right to legal abortion in the United States largely hinges on a right to privacy.) The personality test is a brilliant device for her to take up. It’s mechanized introspection. Like the “quantified self” practices where you log your daily exercise, mood, sex life, etc., the idea is that the test will bring out patterns in your life that you hadn’t consciously noticed. It’s the promise of psychotherapy, only now the unconscious is found in your data rather than your dreams.

But of course that’s the same kind of pattern that has value for Tesco, or Amazon, or whatever. With a personality test, it’s like you are trying to get back for yourself what the algorithms already know—and in the process feeding them more and better data. The Cambridge Analytica case seemed to outrage people with the realization that the personal information we feed into the Internet is going somewhere, and being sold to someone who wants to influence us through what we see online. Um, yes.

Making the exposure explicitly to your circle of contacts—people with names and faces—makes it non-anonymous (and probably is a telling personality test in its own right. I am way too much an introvert for that. I couldn’t even click on Aliza’s message!).