

# Stories fort/da my significant other

Claire Farago

Since each of us was several, there was already a crowd... To reach, not the point where one no longer says I, but the point where it is no longer of any importance whether one says I. We are no longer ourselves. Each will know his own. We have been aided, inspired, multiplied.

– Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*

My heartfelt thanks to Jae and Philip for conceiving this *festschrift* and inviting me to join the celebration of my husband's career as a scholar, teacher, writer, gadfly; art historian, architectural historian, semiotician, philosopher, critic; and last but not least, champion of (im)possible causes. Over the years, it has been a great pleasure to come to know many of Donald's students, including a brilliant progeny of PhDs who are now leading voices and scholars in a number of different fields of art history, ranging from ancient Mediterranean archaeology to contemporary art and art theory (no teleological trajectory intended). I begin anecdotally, partly because it is not possible to summarize what I owe Donald after so many years and places of collaboration. And neither is it easy to speak publicly about one's private debts. Donald and I met initially in the fall of 1973. I had dropped in unannounced on my former professor at MIT, Wayne Andersen, whose seminar entitled 'non-directional thinking' was a formative experience for me as an undergraduate. In its third semester – second, then third, because no one wanted the course to end – the seminar went on a retreat where we (professor and students of art history, architecture, physics, engineering, but not artists per se) improvised a collaborative two-screen, nine-minute movie shot in 'real time' to performatively convey our ever-unfolding understanding of the non-directional creative process. No fudging of the cinematic record, thus intentionally collapsing artificial distinctions between fact and fiction. It was a mythomorphic earthwork-ish exercise undertaken at a time when neither the word mythomorphic nor the term concept art yet existed. In those days, idealism ran high: we students were protesting the Vietnam war and the military-industrial complex, and calling for more transparency and greater accountability in government.

On the particular day of my visit in 1973, Wayne was co-teaching a seminar with a certain Don Preziosi, who had recently joined the School of Architecture and Urban Planning: 'Would I like to come along?' So Donald and I met for the first time in a classroom. All I can remember of the discussion is that we were all exchanging multi-leveled puns reminiscent of the non-directional thinking seminar.

Our connection, Donald's and mine, was immediate and filled with joyful intellectual play. Out of this encounter developed an intense relationship that lasted only a few months. Fast-forward some nineteen years when our paths crossed unexpectedly at the CAA. I had on a whim wandered into a session led by Martha Rosler. There was Don Preziosi, the discussant not listed in the program, speaking animatedly and bounding around the darkened room with enormous energy. I slouched in a back row, wondering if he would remember me if he saw me. And he did see me, amazingly recognized me even in the dark. That coincidence is how Donald and I met the second time around, which proved to be very different from the first. He had become 'famous' upon the publication of *Rethinking Art History* and I was a late-blooming assistant professor who had just used *Rethinking Art History* in my grad seminar. So Donald had actually been on my mind a lot lately. Now we began a new professional relationship by exchanging papers and speaking at each other's institutions. In 1997, I was invited to UCLA for a term as Arts Council Visiting Professor where we co-taught a seminar that later developed into a symposium on 'Race, Nation, and Aesthetics.' (That is how I first met Jae, as Donald's student during these years.) *Grasping the World: the Idea of the Museum* (2004) would emerge from those collaborations.

Getting to know Donald in his 50s came with memories of knowing him in his early 30s when he had a huge Afro and equally enormous black eyes, gentle and inscrutable. So there was an element of the uncanny at play. Hair diminished, eyes wiser but no less fathomless, he manifested the same wry dry wit, with its piercing ability to cut to the quick of the matter whatever the matter, seeing (and seeking) connections, inviting dialogue by putting his own provocative ideas on the line. He had remained one of the few art historians I knew who read widely and strategically beyond the field of art history. Aside from my own quirky reading habits of course. I quickly became reacquainted with his appreciation for the absurdity of life, his poetic gift for the *bon mot*, his indefatigable energy to challenge ill-conceived ideas; in short, his own particular daily practice of life as critique. Yet nearly a decade passed before we entered into a personal relationship. Due to the recursive nature of our relationship now spanning more than forty years, I thought about titling this essay 'channeling Derrida,' after Donald's favorite writer (along with Plato, Jacques Lacan, Giorgio Agamben, Judith Butler, Wallace Stevens, and a few others, that is), but when we first met, Foucault's *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, which had just appeared in English, was the favorite topic of our conversations. (Twenty years later, I was able to produce his marked-up paperback as evidence of where we left off.) Having gone our separate ways for two decades, I was amazed at how much we shared (and still share) a commitment to writing history ethically. The 1960s and early '70s were formative years for both of us. Some things stuck that I would never want to change.

Early on (in the second time around) we discovered a joint interest in collecting practices and the historical idea of art. I was surprised by these enduring similarities, especially given our very different training in archeology and semiotics,

versus Renaissance art theory. Commonalities of purpose and differences of expertise initially formed the basis for our collaborative writing projects, beginning with *Grasping the World*.

But now I want to touch upon a politically sensitive topic because it is so important both to our relationship and our work as critical historians. Donald's support of me as a woman negotiating a patriarchal academic environment has been an enormous source of validation from the beginning, when I was a graduate student (at Brown) and Donald was a visiting professor at MIT. What I have found as a practicing scholar is certainly not what I expected as a woman committing to a career around 1971, the same year that Linda Nochlin's 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?' was originally published in *Art News*. It takes a great deal of determination for women to succeed in any field dominated by men. Donald has always been a feminist at heart, queering/querying all forms of received wisdom including "the establishment," to use a favorite term of the late 1960s. Donald, like other modern philosophers concerned with empathy and the Other, positions himself as marginalized. Through his own Nietzschean example, Donald teaches us all to practice the hermeneutics of suspicion with affirmative joy. As his collaborator, I also personally owe to Donald invitations to speak at many international venues that have enabled us to participate jointly in today's republic of letters. This creative community has given me great strength to articulate my convictions. Intellectuals have a responsibility to society and I am fortunate to have so many colleagues around the world who practice this commitment. Donald and I together have developed deep friendships through this network. In the past two decades and more we have also collaborated on two book projects and advised one another on countless papers and articles. We soon realized that editing one another's prose is futile. Instead, we developed a more organic process of writing *through* one another's prose. I recognize ourselves in Deleuze and Guattari's explanation of their own working process, in the famous lines cited above, each will know his (or her) own, but it is not important (or always even possible) to distinguish who owns which part.

Donald's extended investments in certain fundamental insights are key to his working methods. Often he talks things out first, but what emerges in print or as a talk is the result of extensive shaping of the text. Donald's mode of fabrication is poetic – by which I mean that the style or artifice of his prose, its rhythms when spoken aloud, have as important a role in creating 'meaning' as the words and arguments themselves. Donald's arguments have always been performative in this sense. Actually, Donald often doesn't *begin* with arguments at all – he begins with inventing a title. The title is a prompt, the prompt elicits a voice, the voice starts thinking and talking. *Then* the arguments emerge, often playfully, provocatively, but relentlessly, moving forward through indirection, fort and da, and giving encouragement to others to question through his own example.

How does this exchange work in our own collaborations? At the moment, we collaborate mostly through conversation that informs our respective projects.

For example, Donald has recently written exquisite commentaries on the texts I assigned for discussion in my grad seminar on 'artists' ways of knowing' – our initial 'toolkit' of theoretical texts included Derrida, Deleuze and Guattari, Bruno Latour, and Jane Bennett. Donald's insights then informed my own teaching, and the students' insights filtered back through our conversations. To return to the beginning again, my Significant Other is not another I, but a complex, multi-modal supplement to the many me's we each are. In Preziosian terms, our conversations are affordances, a romance of (un)known siblings committed to dancing until dawn. Wasp and orchid. I can illustrate our understanding of identity through a recent news story about how monarch butterflies stay on course through a 3,000-mile annual migration. Using the horizontal position of the sun and judging the time of day with neurons in their antennae and eyes, monarch butterflies possess a cellular circuitry that integrates them with their environment.

The story on the BBC reports that the scientist wants to make robotic butterflies. I prefer to think about how we are all sort-of monarch butterflies as far as navigation skills are concerned (even though my own sense of orientation leaves a lot to be desired). But I am most excited that the scientifically-gathered evidence demonstrates that philosophy and science offer morphologically similar accounts of the world. Donald speaks about 'adequation' in these terms as the key semiotic structure for all who are concerned with understanding art/artifice, what it is, how it functions. When I first knew Donald, he spoke about isomorphisms and 'The Net of Indra,' which was going to become a book to deal with correspondences of this kind that grew out of his study of Minoan architecture. Palimpsests and other structures that we discussed then as 'isomorphic' serve now as an apt description of 'art' as something that happens as/at the intersection of various agencies. Every shimmering pearl in Indra's net is colored by its neighbors, and that coloring shifts constantly as one changes position. The viewer/historian exists within the same field of relations as the object of study: this is the fundamental principle of "immanent critique," a concept I first really understood from *Rethinking Art History*. To understand what art is and does in this manner puts into question the distinction (and parallel) between 'culture' and 'nature' on which our (Mediterranean) notions of artistry are based. In other words, the famous dyad of categories at the core of modern understandings of identity comes with a long history of its own. Worth unpacking.

If the truth can make us free, it is also true that this freedom is not easy to attain. One of my favorite phrases by Judith Butler aptly describes what Donald and I do together/apart/in-between: we try to see the frame that blinds us to what we see.<sup>1</sup> That frame –whatever frame– also *binds* us to what we see. Donald's teaching and writings have generated many different liberating outcomes over the (so far) 55 years of his career, through which the guiding principle of his own work has

<sup>1</sup> Judith Butler, "Photography, War, Outrage," *Modern Language Association of America*, 120: 3, May 2005, 826.

remained constant: meaning is always relational, always dependent upon context, which is itself without intrinsic limits. It follows that for better or worse - the choice is ours - the history of art is a made-up thing.

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