

FREE ROSES

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SMOKE GETS IN YOUR EYES

by Annie Godfrey Larmon

“The only thing that is different from one time to another is what is seen and what is seen depends upon how everybody is doing everything. This makes the thing we are looking at very different and this makes what those describe it make of it, it makes a composition, it confuses, it shows, it is, it looks, it likes it as it is, and this makes what is seen as it is seen. Nothing changes from generation to generation except the thing seen and that makes a composition.”

—Gertrude Stein, *Composition as Explanation*, 1926

In 1961, Claes Oldenburg opened his seminal work *The Store*, an eighty-foot-long, ten-foot-wide “environment” on East Second Street in New York, which was essentially indistinguishable from the surrounding shops. Oldenburg, too, sold cigarettes, ice cream, baked potatoes, hats, and lingerie, but his wares were replicas hewn from earthy muslin soaked in plaster and painted haphazardly with dripping enamel: aggressively misshapen part-object commodities. The artist’s notes on the project include a modulating set of associations:

cock and balls equals tie and collar
equals leg and bra
equals stars and stripes
flag equals cigarette package and cigarettes heart equals balls and triangle
equals (upside down) girdle and stockings

The logic of Oldenburg’s semiotic equations—leveling improbable objects to wrest desire and signification alike from the fixedness of commodities—might well apply to the components of almost any work by neo-Pop ragpicker Alex Da Corte. Da Corte’s inexplicable combines, videos, and immersive installations entangle tag-sale schlock, family relics, other people’s artwork, handcraft, and sleekly fabricated objects to muse on consumerism’s impact on visual culture. Since 2004, his work has been congealing into an accretive discourse on desire that summons the slasher perviness of bogeyman Michael Myers just as it does the painstaking poetics of Robert Gober. To recalibrate Oldenburg’s list for the purpose of this essay, Da Corte’s inventory would be as follows:

Styrofoam takeout box equals red equals lust
equals IKEA bag and Mom’s Hermès scarf
Calvin Klein’s Obsession equals piss

equals Midas and Bacchus by Poussin and carpet sample
equals Nancy Lupo sculpture and plastic dagger

Oldenburg described the objects sold at *The Store* as “fragments of the field of seeing,” and Hal Foster has theorized them as embodiments of the ways in which commodities were viewed in the East Village in the early days of its rapid gentrification, when high and low commerce were everywhere abutted in physical space. Oldenburg’s description is likewise an apt way to describe Da Corte’s work: His assemblages similarly articulate “fragments of the field of seeing,” but where Oldenburg made expressionistic, lumpy forms, Da Corte’s materialized glimpses are glossy and artificial. They are updated to reflect a contemporary field of vision that extends across virtual and physical space, where looking itself is a form of both labor and consumption, and the agendas of neoliberal capitalism creep ever deeper into subjectivity. In this field, the material and immaterial are sometimes interchangeable—think of the Contemporary Art Daily effect, or as John Kelsey has asked, “How much of the painting is already in the TIFF?”—or semiotically interdependent. In this field, we have been trained to identify with mass-produced objects and images in a way that allows them to slip ever more easily into—beyond what we covet—what we consider to be a part of us; and, once they have appeared on our Twitter or Instagram feed, even something we authored.

In this way, Da Corte imitates a visual culture in which reproduction, replication, and forgery are already occurring all the time, throwing mimesis into *mise en abyme*. He has done this literally: in *1 O O O I S L A N D* at Joe Sheftel Gallery in New York in 2013, an exhibition in which the viewer entered a striped, mirrored space where objects referencing the life of Marshall Mathers (Eminem)—including one portrait by Elizabeth Peyton—were strewn. The mirrored chamber seemingly implicated the viewer in the popular narrative of the misogynist rap menace, who built his own career on appropriation. Or, in the gothic spectacle of *Die Hexe* (2015), a three-floor installation at Luxembourg & Dayan in New York, he placed Guber’s *Untitled* (1993)—a handmade chrome-plated bronze replica of an industrial drain—in a mirrored closet that could only be viewed through a peephole. The crafted copy became refracted and multiplied, indivisible from its simulacra.

In many cases, Da Corte’s selections and replications of fragments of the consumer world are ushered under the sometimes seductive and sometimes off-putting glow of neon lights: the neon glow of red-light districts and motels, of casinos and box stores, of grow lights (it is easy to imagine their irritating, patient hum) and horror-movie hysteria. It’s the neon glow of desire, which immediately psychologizes whatever it is cast onto. (See *Die Hexe*; *Devil Town*, a 2015 installation at Giò Marconi in Milan; *Delirium I*, 2014, at David Risley Gallery in Copenhagen; or *Taut Eye Tau*, 2015, at the Lyon Biennale; but also the neon glyphs that embellish the theater-in-the-round constructed to house, *Easternsports* 2014, the telenovela he produced with Jayson Musson and Devonté Hynes at the Institute

of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia.) It's also a glow that has an undeniable resonance with the soft blue light that emanates from the screens that everywhere surround us. (The cold cathode, gas-discharge light of neon is, of course, different from what emits from liquid crystal displays, but their fluorescence is effectively similar.) Da Corte amplifies this pervasiveness; the glow is a dominating force in his immersive installations—it renders everything cinematic, infusing space with potential as it severs a viewer's coordinates from the world beyond the neon—and it is difficult to read anything it touches outside the context of Internet-saturated visual culture: unmoored, scopophilic hyper-mediatization.

This is critical to understanding the artist's output: His work doesn't directly employ the Internet, the digital, or even screens. Rather, where artists from Cory Arcangel to Artie Vierkant explicitly wrestle with the unseen networks that facilitate production and circulation, Da Corte explores the impact of these systems on the still-prevalent seen networks—haptic networks—and their ability to touch and be touched, affect and be affected. In so doing, he offers a rejoinder to the oft-sung contemporary mythology of an all-subsuming digital interface, while he parses the ways in which this interface does indeed change the way we look—at the world and at ourselves—and the way we *want*. He acknowledges the contradictions at the root of the Internet, a tool that is as democratizing as it is responsible for disaffectation. Put another way, his assemblages take into account the shifting and fleeting status of desire in a digital era that has brought a conflicting combination of effects: immediate representational gratification and an unprecedented alienation from our tools, our heritage, our bodies. What new forms of desire does this alienation produce? Taking this question as charge, Da Corte traces the object realities of the things that bear witness to or collect residue—not just metaphorically but also physically—of this alienation.

Though it undoubtedly responds to a “post-Internet” visual ecosystem, Da Corte's work is frequently written about in the context of his neo- Conceptualist forebears rather than those of his contemporaries we might provisionally assign to the post-Internet crowd. Da Corte draws on and cannibalizes methods of appropriation from the commodity- fetishism-critical Neo Geos and abjectionists Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy, as well as the aforementioned Oldenburg and Gober (again, it is no accident that he makes these references obvious, at times even incorporating works by these artists into his installations)—and from them he gains a syntax of critique just as he secures a discursive lineage for his practice. But he doesn't appropriate appropriations in an ironic gesture. And while, like many of his peers, Da Corte appropriates from all corners of visual culture, his work isn't about celebrating the promiscuousness of the Internet and its symptomatic aesthetic of recombinatory vacuity (think of the surfeit of works seen in recent years that, like a manic update on neo- Expressionism, indiscriminately sample the tropes and forms made readily available by seemingly infinite online information).

Da Corte's output *attends* to the way objects, references, and discourses

touch, imbricate, and obscure each other. More like the bricolage efforts of Isa Genzken or Rachel Harrison, his work is dependent upon the richly encoded meanings that underlie its elements of pop-cultural schlock, art history, or family heirloom. But he departs from this work too. Where Harrison, for example, assembles disparate scraps of visual culture so that they disjointedly coexist, exacerbating the postmodern absurdity that accompanies the global-capitalist packaging of commodities, news, and public figures alike, Da Corte, with his fugue of materials, tests out what happens when dissimilar things are made intimate in physical space as they so often are online, when they come into contact, share a surface or a skin. His work seems self-aware of its engagement with the same absurdity Harrison's work projects, but it trades cheekiness for patience. His early works foreground the unpredictability and messiness that accompany objects persisting in physical space. In the three-minute video *Chelsea Hotel No. 2* (2010), for example, disembodied hands sink their fingers into dollar-store tchotchkes and cheap produce, querying their forms by touch and coating themselves in clumps and drips of cherry syrup, coffee grounds, bologna slime, and white flour. Or, in his paintings made of poured Alberto VO5 shampoo (see *Lime House* and *Last Splash*, both 2012) or rubber (*Melon Patch*, 2014), the substance becomes sticky, picking up fingerprints, dust, and wayward hairs. In *A Season in He'll*, *Bad Blood*, and *The Impossible* (all 2012), a man erotically performs inscrutable tasks with an egg painted black, a dagger set in brass knuckles, and a chintzy white vase in slow motion. In *A Season in He'll*, he stands before a hot-yellow backdrop and is accompanied by a pulsing John Carpenter-like soundtrack by the rapper and producer Le1f. (The haunting quality of this scene portended an event that will forever associate the work with a complicated entanglement of art and life, when on May 22, 2015, the actor, Thomas Brennan, used this very dagger in a drug-related murder.) In each of these works, Da Corte squeezes something libidinal out of the anonymous sheen of the mass-produced and the genetically modified—these things whose appeal to the retinal often (intentionally by their makers) overshadows their physical quality—reconnecting touch and desire.

Over time, his works have increasingly translated digital procedures and effects into non-digital material. For his exhibition *Fun Sponge* at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Portland, Maine, in 2013, Da Corte produced a series of "Plastics Paintings" square collages that leaned against the gallery, undergirded by a pink and brown carpet that crawled up one wall. Viewers were invited to rearrange the works, as if manipulating animation cels—something of a "choose your own adventure." The collages contain CD sleeves, SpongeBob balloons, slices of white bread, dollar bills, and artworks by such artists as Nancy Lupo, Sascha Braunig, and Andrew Gbur, all embedded in poured paint. While the contents of the pieces are discarded junk, found by chance in the street, or borrowed artworks made by friends who consented to have their work subsumed within his, they were arranged with the logic one might apply when unthinkingly overlapping windows on a laptop screen: a personal photo partially blocking a Mariah Carey video blocking an eBay

bid blocking Contemporary Art Daily. We see here that the stakes of this inquiry are not only ontological—about the physical and the virtual, or the real and the copy—but also economic. If A touches B, does it lose its aura? Will B rise to A's status, or will A stoop to B's? How do they enter each other's orbit of desire, and how is each re-psychologized by their shared position? Given the relative naturalization of rampant digital reproduction, it isn't a leap to imagine we've transferred the any-space-whatever's laissez-faire attitude toward authorship to objects in the physical world.

When talking about his work, the artist often uses the term palimpsest. He has described "locating how sentiment and value shift through context, time, or geography; how cultural icons and reference points gather moss and grow...we too can become palimpsests..." Indeed, whether this work takes up trifles or keepsakes, the mass-produced or the personal—a discarded decorative pumpkin (*BLRBBB!*, 2011), his grandmother's dollhouses (*Die Hexe*), Bruce Weber's 1999 Abercrombie & Fitch summer catalogue centerfold (The Desert, The Cube, The Ladder, *The Horse*, *The Flower*, and *The Storm*, 2013), or a Sascha Braunig painting (*Loose Diamond [Arnolfini]*, 2013)—Da Corte's engagement with ready-made objects underscores the disparate layers or aspects that are apparent beneath their surface—things that might evade the one-dimensionality of images readily transferring hands and contexts online. For Da Corte, touch, physical interaction, the duration these require, and the types of memories they contribute to are forms of resistance to the alienation wrought by a "field of seeing" that extends from the browser to the bay window, and in which space and image complicate each other.

And, in fact, he has explicitly mimicked the ways in which space and image are losing their distinctions in the contemporary commercial field of seeing. In July 2013 at Oko—a short-lived gallery curated by Alison Gingeras in New York's East Village, not a mile away from where Oldenburg's The Store closed half a century earlier—Da Corte, in collaboration with Borna Sammak, unveiled his own shop: *As Is Wet Hoagie*, an exhibition in a locked storefront whose windows were illuminated with burning neon signs reading HOAGIE and HELL HERE. Peering into the windows, one could make out two more storefronts behind the building's façade—the first white brick and the second purple faux brick—each with a door and a window that echoed the original façade. Each window offered a hot mess of cut-rate goods and advertising—a shiny hot dog, Barbasol, Gatorade, lotto tickets, Doritos—partially obscured by reflected neon and the sticky glare of plastic wrap. The effect was, in some ways, that of a *mise en abyme* extended like an accordion in one direction into physical space; in other ways, the outside window space became a screen on which the abstraction of space behind it became flattened into a collage-like image.

For most of the duration of *As Is Wet Hoagie*, entry was foreclosed to the viewer. The doors opened at the end of August, which allowed access to a small room that previously could only be seen, in part, through the series of frames created by the three storefronts. One discovered a room dressed in Daniel Buren—

inflected red-and-white stripes, at its center a long bench poised on Coca-Cola cans and supporting the titular hoagie: a massive, fifty-four-inch sandwich. The delayed gratification of this reveal amounted to a phallic joke on the fetish object. It also served as a pointed departure from the work *As Is Wet Hoagie* otherwise so heavily owes to: Duchamp's seminal and strange, violent and voyeuristic scene, *Étant donnés: 1° la chute d'eau, 2° le gaz d'éclairage...* (Given: 1. The Waterfall, 2. The Illuminating Gas...)(1946–66), which is permanently housed in Da Corte's own Philadelphia at the Museum of Art. Indeed, both installations enact the ways in which desire sits between and contours the poles of artifice and nature. When regarding Duchamp's work, the eye is drawn back to a lantern, held improbably skyward by an otherwise cadaverous figure; it is drawn, too, to the figure's oddly articulated genitalia, because it doesn't possess the natural detail we expect. Standing outside of Da Corte and Sammak's store, we wonder if we've arrived too early or too late, and because we can't get in, we contort ourselves to peek at what might be offered behind the series of façades that obstruct our gaze. But Duchamp's illusion of space and atmosphere remains that—an illusion; and, effectively, an image. The viewer is never granted access to the world beyond the peephole, or to the face of the woman mysteriously splayed behind it. *As Is Wet Hoagie* broke the seal of the image, inviting a viewer to penetrate and manipulate it, to become part of it.

This play between inaccessibility and accessibility is typical of Da Corte's practice. In the melancholically flirtatious series "The Foolish Virgin Quilts" (2014), Da Corte mined his mother's collection of Hermès scarves; his father buys one for her every year on their anniversary, but she keeps the lot hidden, unworn, under her bed. He photographed the silk scarves, and then printed each onto a cheap nylon banner and embellished it with prosthetic scabs and witch noses, the detritus of Hot Topic sale bins. In *Red Anthuriums Blush* (2014), satin gloves, silk red flowers, a Devil cape, rubber devil horns, and mirrored plexiglass are sewn onto the faux French luxury. Clearly, these works play at the idea that a digital copy might stand in for an original (without touching the scarves, it is arguably difficult to detect their status as rip-offs). But, by polluting the coveted textile proxies with cheap costumery, Da Corte also brings to the surface the fraught relationship many would have to an Hermès scarf. Perhaps more than its status as real or fake, the wearer of the garment greatly changes its meaning: For those whose lifestyles don't match up, an Hermès scarf might look more like a tacky disguise—a pretense—than a Devil kit. Moreover, "The Foolish Virgin Quilts"(as with many of Da Corte's works) is wrapped up in the impulse to collect in a way that resonates with Mike Kelley's connection of this urge with the uncanny. In a 2004 interview with media theorist Jeffrey Sconce, Kelley (referencing Freud) described the drive to accumulate things that might stand in for the self as being accompanied by a fear of being overtaken by forces external to the body that could be confused with one's sense of self. In Da Corte's series, a plastic medieval dagger, rubber witch fingers, or devil horns materialize this fear, just as they underscore that class and access are indivisible

from the ways in which this fear is experienced.

Freakish costumes recur in Da Corte's work. For his 2010–12 performance *Fear Street*, the artist made a mask of the kind worn by the character Michael Myers in John Carpenter's 1978 horror film classic *Halloween*, donned the disguise [see *Untitled (Self-Portrait)*, 2011, and stood in the bushes outside his family's home in Haddonfield, New Jersey, spying on his mother and father as they cooked dinner and his sister as she watched television. In relation to this work, the artist has described his intention to incorporate a certain farsightedness into his personal experiences: to dually make the familiar unfamiliar enough to desire it, and to grasp, permeate, or debunk what is still distant enough to be an object of fantasy—to collapse the complex operations of desire. (In Samuel Weber's 1996 essay "Television: Set and Screen," the theorist reminds us that the word television means "seeing at a distance.") In other works, Da Corte has transformed himself into Eminem (*TRUE LIFE*, 2013), a witch (*The Old Fart*, 2014), and a mummy (*Easternsports*, 2014). For *Die Hexe*, he produced a mask from a cast of his grandmother's face. It's as though by subsuming his own subjectivity into the skin of another, he might see differently. As though the skin—the frame—of the costume might allow for an elected experience of simultaneous remove and immediacy, the simultaneous being-in-the-here-and-now and being-elsewhere—the schizo-temporality—made possible by screens, FaceTime, or online avatars.

Fear Street and *Red Anthuriums Blush* exemplify a brand of generosity in Da Corte's work that rings in the tune of Camp; that is, he everywhere celebrates what Susan Sontag described as "things-being-what-they-are-not." Of course, Camp, as Sontag has theorized it, is all about the dialectic of accessibility and inaccessibility. It's about working in earnest with what you have to transform experience through artifice and exaggeration. She describes Art Nouveau objects as Camp par excellence: they "convert one thing into something else: the lighting fixtures in the form of flowering plants, the living room which is really a grotto." These objects fit right in—just look to *Die Hexe* for Avon perfume bottles converted into rococo bongs. Da Corte's work is populated by many references and memories and bodies, and is transfixed by each of their deficits. In the true spirit of Camp, Da Corte's work evinces the discovery of pleasure in both illusion and failed illusion, signaling the potential opened up by engaging with the physical world as freely as we do the virtual.