

over-obdo-overrevo-do

appropriation meditation

“Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery.” *
Charles Caleb Colton (c. 1820)

In *Une voix me rappelle toujours* (2016), Myriam Jacob-Allard adopts the role of media-archivist-ethnographer-performer-collector, by cataloguing the particular (peculiar?) tradition of western themed bars in Québec, Canada. Instead of re-creating the acts of the country western singers themselves, Jacob-Allard chooses to re-perform the amateur YouTube renditions of these same songs. Fulfilling all the best YouTube tropes—domestic settings, awkward framing, garish backdrops—Jacob-Allard’s videos are funny, yet oddly intimate and sentimental. As commentary on fandom and a specific and fast-disappearing subculture, Jacob-Allard’s piece is a testament to the power of song as oral history, the ways in which we put ourselves on display, and our inherent longing to belong.

Carrie Fonder undertakes a different kind of internet imitation. In *OUH HUO* (2017) the artist impersonates star-curator Hans Ulrich Obrist giving a TED Talk. The piece is at once a re-enactment (after the fact) and an intervention (in real time): a doubling occurs as the impersonator is overlaid with their subject. Fonder is physically transformed

using prosthetics, makeup and costume, but the mimicry extends to the body language, gestures, and tone of voice. Reading aloud from faulty-closed captioning of the original presentation, Obrist's voice is eclipsed and all original meaning is lost. The effect is confusing, absurd, revealing. Fonder slyly gestures at the opacity of artspeak, to the loss of meaning inherent in HUU's own speech, and the insularity of the artworld.

Allana Clarke also tackles privilege in the artworld with her video *Diagram of the Gaze: After Hal, Jacques, and other white boys* (2013). Both content and title will delight the savvy viewer, with Easter egg references that keep you guessing at additional interpretations. The performers, lathered in an oil-like substance, attempt to lie on top of one another, an impossible task given the slickness of their slippery skin. The slime green stripe and white title card recalls movies' preview screen, while other sequences seem to loop, GIF-like, and all the while slow-motion scenes, glitches, and distortions occur. The piece recalls an iconic work of performance art, Zhang Huan's *To Add a Meter to an Anonymous Mountain* (1995), but where Huan is serious and poised, Clarke's work is clever and playful but no less insightful. Challenging the (usually) male (definitely) white gaze, the performers' autonomy and assuredness

signals their active participation in the piece, while laughter and bodily noises of flesh and bottles squirting defuse any latent erotic tension.

Appropriation. Citation. Re-enactment. Reference. These strategies lay bare the fallacy of the genius artist in his ivory tower. There is no art devoid of history. Appropriation can be used to reframe the conversation and to claim a seat at the table. It can also be a powerful tool against forgetfulness, bringing into focus an object, element, or gesture from another time and place. The work of Clarke, Fonder, and Jacob-Allard is rich in meaning, clever and generous, and not a little bit humorous. Appropriation is potent because it makes us question the limits of originality, authorship, and authenticity—values that are always being challenged in art—but also qualities that are especially highly prized in a society where the meaning of “truth” (who tells it? who is believed?) is up for grabs.

*The origins of this well-worn phrase were unknown to me, but a quick Google search revealed it was coined by an English cleric named Charles Caleb Colton in 1820. His books of collected aphorisms were incredibly popular, and though his words are still replicated in memes and quotation books today, his name has mostly been forgotten except on websites like goodreads.com, wikiquote.org, and brainyquote.com.