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Embodying Art and Art History: An Experiment with a Class Video Happening for the Series *Access Denied*

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Abstract

A book written in a foreign language and migrated to the US along with its author, an art historian, finds a new communicative dimension by becoming a ready-made for art making purposes. Starting with an introduction explaining the genesis of the collaborative project *Access Denied*, this article focuses on one of the series' artworks, namely a video-happening, by exploring its genesis, development, and outcomes. Staged during the day of finals in an advanced art history seminar, the experiment provided an embodied artistic experience and some reflections on art history course content in the debate that followed. The video happening became a basis for further reflection in this essay on the role of performance in stimulating arts-based research at the interstices between biography and scholarly inquiry, between art and art history, between modernism and postmodernism, between object and action, and between creation and destruction as the two opposite poles in modern creativity.

A Neglected Book on American Photorealism Becomes the Ground for Arts-Based Exploration

In 1998-99 while I was still living in Italy, I took on the challenge of writing my Master's degree dissertation on American Photorealism. The severe negative criticism and fast dismissal of this topic, made as early as 1972-73 by eminent scholars Giulio Carlo Argan and Gillo Dorfles (Carli, 2003; Mercurio, 2003), created barriers that discouraged major attempts towards deeper understanding of this artistic phenomenon in Italy. The existing superficial and negatively biased dismissal of photorealist artists situated them as incompetent in life drawing, photography plagiarizers, revivalists of the XIX century realism, and as promoting forms of capitalistic imperialism. My more favorable scholarly approach framed and justified Photorealism as a mature modernist development within the wider context of other artistic manifestations between the sixties and seventies.

Two books came out of this dissertation: in 2000 a monograph on artist Don Eddy, and in 2004 the first book-length scholarship on American Photorealism in Italy, *L'Iperealismo 'Fotografico' Americano in Pittura. Risonanze Storiche nella East e nella West Coast*.¹ This self-sponsored book had a relatively modest circulation and was not able to find an appropriate unprejudiced context, in Italy, to be promoted at the academic level.

In 2005, not long after completing my Doctoral dissertation, an interdisciplinary study reconstructing the reception of American Photorealism at Documenta 5 in Kassel, I decided to migrate to the United States. My scholarship moved with me: however, once in a new country, its language became another barrier to overcome, as I would not be able to teach my students from a book they were not able to read.

For all these reasons, this book on Photorealism came to embody a sense of permanent displacement and in-between-ness that later on I found perfect for arts-based explorations. As post-Pop legacy, Photorealism is situated at the edge between mature modernism and postmodernism, therefore connecting the timeline of our course on late modernism and our postmodern context. During a class experiment envisioned by one of the two Italian nontraditional students for *Access Denied*, my students unknowingly came to embody a ritual to metaphorically address art history's fallacies towards this misunderstood artistic style.

¹ The only exception is Italo Mussa's *Il Vero più Vero del Vero*, a monograph published in 1974. Preceded by a general introduction, the monograph focused on the translation of the interviews to some Photorealist artists appeared in the November-December 1972 issue of *Art in America*.

The Access Denied, from Conference Abstract to Class Project

On January 16, 2009, I received communication that my paper proposal, submitted earlier in Fall 2008, was accepted at the 4th International Conference on the Arts in Society under the section “Teaching and Learning the Arts.” The abstract I submitted, with the title *The Access Denied Series: Restrictions as Liberating Forms of Communication*, succinctly recalled the problematic origins of this book and the author’s scholarly displacement, wishing for a transformation of the book into:

(...) a series of mixed-media conceptual works, which should creatively redesign a new role for this book, as well as a new educative dimension for art history itself. Indeed, I intend to involve my students into the artistic realization of this concept, in parallel to their art history studies, and have them virtually “dialoguing” with some of the great masters of XX century art. In this way, the project becomes the occasion for exploring mine, my art students’ and the audience’s own artistic and intellectual identities. Paradoxically, a denied access to the reading and handling of this book would allow it to acquire a new and rich communicative dimension.²

The uncertainty on the outcome of my proposal prevented me from inserting the project in any spring course syllabus. However, as soon as I received notice of acceptance, I immediately talked with my advanced visual arts students, enrolled in an art history special topics seminar³ to check if we could explore this idea together. I introduced this as an alternative, experimental project, to the more traditional intensive-writing art history paper, and allowed students to choose between the two. A little less than half of the class opted to try the Access Denied project.

The upper-division art history classes, including this seminar, address studio arts, art education and graphic design students, who use art history as a complement to their education in the visual arts. Due to the modest size of the art history program, it is not unusual that students come to the advanced seminar after taking only an art appreciation course and the two-part survey, both at lower-division level. Often, students come to the upper-level art history courses with little understanding and appreciation of art history contents and methods; however, the solid studio background accumulated in their respective majors makes them

² The integral text of my submission is found in the web: <http://a09.cgpublisher.com/proposals/503/index.html>

³ The seminar in question was *Pop Art (and Beyond)*, Spring 2009. The course started from the antecedents to Pop Art (Cubism, Duchamp, the Neodadaism of Rauschenberg and Johns, the Nouveau Réalisme) and expanded on British and American Pop Art.

open to new ideas, especially if involving an art-making component.

The project became partially local and partially dispersed to address that I was going to engage both art making and art history. I teamed with ceramics Professor Mary Harden, a member of the art faculty from my previous affiliation in Oregon and two non-traditional art students from Italy, Marco Pascarella and Marco Martelli.⁴ This provided an additional layer of displacement, once again reflecting my biography: Italy, Oregon, and South Dakota, where the participants live, are all places I have lived or I am currently living. Any extension of my biographical component in the series' general concept allowed me to become a conceptual artist. In my newly acquired role, I was able to establish a deeper dialogue with my art and design students. Students were allowed to expand the paradox denying/releasing of the general concept (=an art history book not meant to be read acquired a new communicative dimension by being incorporated into art making) through an idea of their own choice and in their own language, whether English or Italian.

In a recent study linking arts-based research and curricular practices, James Haywood Rolling (2010) warned against the excessive academic structuring as hampering the development of "unpredictable thought, the kinds of metaphorical leaps that charter innovation" (pp.110-111). Similarly, I am convinced that when an opportunity with great potential surfaces and is agreed upon by students, the faculty should, to reasonable extent, welcome and try to accommodate it in the course. Teaching art history through arts-based research requires the art historian to explore the interstices between the claimed "objectivity" of art history and the "subjectivity" of art making. As Rita L. Irwin and Stephanie Springgay (2008) claim, a/r/tographic inquiry finds realization especially when "hybrid communities of artists, educators, and researchers locate themselves in the space of the in-between to create self-sustaining interrelating identities that inform, enhance, evoke, and/or provoke one another" (p.112).

Each student participant was given a copy of the book. The student was required to choose a theme, ranging from very personal to more general, and try to give it concrete visual form in any chosen medium, by incorporating the book in whole, in part, or in fragments into his/her own project. In order to tie his or her work to the general concept of the series *Access Denied*, the student would need to find a way to make the book inaccessible, in answer to the general question: "by making the book untouchable and unreadable, what do you want to communicate?" The inspiration for the students' projects originated from their study of a

⁴ The two Italian non-traditional art students were invited to engage the project on a more mature level, so that their work would become a role model to the undergraduate students.

major artist, or a combination of artists, within the chronological span of the course. Students' ideas, as well as their techniques and process, were described in a development paper that combined artistic self-reflection of the chosen theme and meditation on art history. By making an artwork and a development paper connected to each other, they were asked to cross boundaries between studio art and art history.

The resulting projects were co-juried by Professor Mary Harden, my former colleague in Oregon, a ceramics faculty focusing more on the artistic part of the project, and by me, an art history faculty focusing more on the content part of the development paper. Those students elected to be part of the series were requested to choose a sub-title that would follow the series' general title. The outcomes of this overall project, which was extended to an entire class in Spring 2010, ranged from a three-dimensional animation (Isaac Windham, *Access Denied: Species Identity*, 2009), to mixed-media pieces (Rebecca Cook, *Access Denied: Illumination*, 2009; Sandra Ledbetter, *Access Denied: Time Denied!*, 2009; Evan Place, *Access Denied: Flowing Knowledge*, 2010; Erika Karsky, *Access Denied: Truth Behind the Portrait*, 2010), to photo-documentaries of temporary installations (Isaiah Jackson, *Access Denied: Imprisoned*, 2009; Marco Martelli, *Accesso Negato: Gli Occhiali Magici*, 2009; Shelby Hyde, *Access Denied: Death of Knowledge is Impossible*, 2010) to a class video happening (Marco Pascarella, *Accesso Negato: Il Mare della Conoscenza*, 2009).⁵

This article specifically focuses on the Access Denied project by Marco Pascarella, at his request performed by my seminar class and I during Finals of my Spring 2009 seminar course. At the time, Pascarella was an Italian nontraditional academy art student, graphic designer, and high school teacher living in Latina (Italy). The concept for Pascarella's project was extremely complex, sophisticated, and different than any other within the series, thus deserving more focused attention. It incorporated silkscreen covers, made by Pascarella, as objects, copies of my book, and a happening involving me (as the book's author) and my seminar class. Two student participants were also authors of other pieces that were selected and incorporated in the series. One of them, Isaac Windham, was involved as the videographer for Pascarella's piece, due to his educational background in film and animation.

⁵ Professor Harden involved the students of her intermediate ceramics class: in our respective roles of artist and art historian, Professor Harden and I became co-mentors at distance in both classes, where she focused on the artistic outcomes and I on the development paper. We co-juried all the projects and selected those that became part of the Access Denied series. Additional information on these projects can be found in Cempellin, L. (2012, November). La mostra "Access Denied" alla Hilton M. Briggs Library. *Nuova Museologia*, 27, 5-7.

The fact that our students had no prior experience with performance art made this medium appropriate for experimentation. The two following sections will summarize Pascarella's vision for this experimental work, provide my explanation of its implications in the context of arts-based research, detail the video happening as class experiment, and present key aspects from the class debate that followed.

New Biographical and Creative Dimensions to Art History

For his Access Denied project, Marco Pascarella requested the engagement of myself and the fourteen students of my seminar art history class in an experiment, which he titled *Accesso Negato: Il Mare della Conoscenza* (translated as *Access Denied: The Sea of Knowledge*). Pascarella wrote the score for the happening and discussed it with me at distance. My role was to follow his instructions, as director, and to act as an intermediary. Envisioned by the artist as an experiment, the happening would be partially structured and partially open to students' reactions. As Allan Kaprow (1977/1993) claims, in relation to "communal performances,"

(...) what the handful actually knows or is supposed to derive from the works is uncertain and mute, seeming to have to do with a shared openness to novelty, to being sensitized, to flexibility of stance rather than to possessing a body of hard information and well-rehearsed moves. What passes between the members of this tiny circle are subtle signals about the values of the group they belong to (p.183).

The overall vision for this experiment was first conceived by the artist in the early part of the spring semester, and then sent to me in a few stages of clarification between early March and early May. Pascarella made a number of silkscreen covers for my art history book on American Photorealism (Figure 1) and sent them to me, requesting that I used them in a happening with my class, and that the happening be recorded on a video.



*Figure 1. Marco Pascarella, Accesso Negato: Il Mare della Conoscenza, 2009.
The desk, before the Video Happening.
Photo Leda Cempellin, courtesy Marco Pascarella.*

His development paper became a draft containing some general instructions for me. He expressly requested that I did not share the instructions with my students and that I remain silent through the entire event, to allow for students' improvisations. The only clue given to students was the silkscreened covers featuring an image of sea waves. I showed these to the students, at the beginning of the happening, and recited the title of the work aloud in Italian (so that it would be incomprehensible to them) for the video recording. Additionally, the artist gave me the power to introduce new behaviors, if deemed necessary. It was important for the artist to strike a balance between his own artistic vision and students' direct engagement in completing the meaning of the piece.

Pascarella also requested a video record of the event be made. As previously noted, Isaac Windham became the videographer. He received some instructions from me half an hour prior to the event, so that he would have a basic level of understanding necessary to select and focus on the most significant situations and actions as they were occurring, without having an opportunity to share information with the other students of the class. Finally, Pascarella suggested the possibility of a debate with the class at the conclusion of the happening. I used the opportunity to explain the artist's vision and to make art historical references on the use of the book as a ready-made, the happening itself, and the ties to the mature modernist timeline included in the course. In this complex vision, students would add an artistic experience to their art history class, since the roles of the "artist/teacher" and that of "spectator/student" (Garoian, 1999, p. 39) in a performance are not absolute, rather they can be exchanged. Garoian (1999) explains, "Under the circumstances of performance art pedagogy these roles

frequently reverse, for example, when performing subjectivity students become artists/teachers” (p. 39).

Why did Pascarella choose a happening, involving me and my class, as the embodiment of the Access Denied concept? And from my perspective, did this artistic format have any implications in changing the attitude of art and design students towards art history? This action-based art form and the silkscreened book covers were the perfect fit for our course’s chronological span. It dealt with those challenging years, in which art was taking the form of either object or action. Topics covered in the course included some of the precursors to Pop (Cubism, Dadaism, Action Painting), Robert Rauschenberg, John Cage, Jasper Johns, British and American Pop art, Happening, Nouveau Réalisme, and Minimalism. By recalling the themes of “reproducibility and communication” (M. Pascarella, personal communication, March 5, 2009), the silkscreen covers would echo the main topic of our art history seminar course, namely Pop Art. Noted by Walter Benjamin (1936/1968), the “Mechanical reproduction” of artworks (p.220) long existed in the form of bronze casting, in printmaking techniques, and in photography. It is only in the XX century that it has become recognized as one among the “artistic processes” (pp. 221-222), and we could cite the case of Andy Warhol’s serigraphs as an example more closely related to our course content.

According to Benjamin (1936/1968), a reproduced object loses its original “aura” (p.223) and its connection with history, at the same time absorbing the beholder’s context, which will become the new aura for that object. The all-inclusive definition of the artwork’s “aura” by Walter Benjamin (1936/1968) includes both past and present, “the history to which it was subject throughout the time of its existence” (p.222), at the crossroads between the artwork’s original context, the previously accumulated set of interpretations, and the present encounter with the spectator. Photorealism, as post-Pop legacy, is situated at the edge between mature modernism and postmodernism, and thus pushes the idea of reproduction even further. By directly using a photo as the painting’s subject matter, rather than the correspondent reality, Photorealism reverses and perverts the reproduction mechanism by assigning to the photo an “aura” of authenticity and uniqueness that it did not formerly have. In commenting on Eva Hesse’s work, Griselda Pollock (2006) summarizes claims from opposite schools of thought in analyzing art in exclusive reference to the original cultural context of its creation, versus the cultural analysis’ consideration of constant new meanings anti-historically produced when the artwork meets the viewer at any given time (pp.16-17). Laura Trafi-Prats fully supports the viewpoint of cultural analysis (Trafi-Prats 2009), which allows for a more dynamic stream of reinterpretations in the postmodern era. In 1993, Postmodern artist Sherrie Levine created a connection between herself and works from different eras through her *Small Crate Table:1-6*. The visual combination of repetitive modules from Donald Judd’s minimal sculptures and the crate material used by De Stijl furniture designer Gerrit Rietveld visualizes an historical

connection between Judd and Rietveld, as the former collected furniture made by the latter. Basically, as Howard Singerman (2012) claims, Levine has “used Judd as a reader for Rietveld” (p.114), and herself, a postmodern conceptual artist, as a reader for this connection between the two artists. This example shows how it is possible to use art to visualize historical connections between elements belonging to two different periods and between modern and postmodern contexts. The Access Denied project was not about rewriting art history in class, but rather questioning our collective historical memory. The association Pascarella created between the silkscreened book covers and the audience-centered happening drew chronological connection between our course content revolving around Pop Art and our current postmodern era. This was possible because, as Irwin and Springgay (2008) suggest, the artists’ perception of “time and space” is distinctive than what typically occurs in western culture that interprets time in linear progression and space “as a container”, “They often speak of time as pausing, enduring, changing, interrupting, and pacing, and speak of space as openness, fragmented, endless, confined, and connected” (p.114).

The paradox denying-releasing of Access Denied was staged through my initial intervention, as the book’s author, aimed at restricting the book by applying a cover to it, and then through students’ desirable liberatory actions or behaviors (including removal of the cover):

Obviously, I cannot make an exact prediction about the behavior of the person to whom you will pass the books. He/she could decide to run away with the book or to destroy it, or even prevent its passage. The sense of the experiment consists in the observation of the motion and possible trajectories of the work since its deposition to an unpredictable crowd. (...). The initial performative act – the application of the covers to the books – guarantees a development that does not move, whatever it is, the semantic axis of the performance: the book will always be the subject of a mutation or sublimation; hence, the "censorship" that prevented its circulation will dissolve along with the book’s original state (M. Pascarella, personal communication, April 8, 2009, trans. Leda Cempellin)

In order to act at the interstices between art making and art history, it was important for Pascarella’s project to echo the biographical dimension suggested in the general concept of Access Denied. As an Italian, Pascarella was well aware of the historical resistance against

critical acceptance of Photorealism in Italy, and of my consequent choice to expatriate. We both share the same country of origin, as well as a scholarly passion towards Photorealism.⁶

A metaphorical revision of American Photorealism through performance allowed the convergence of my own biographical dimension (my biculturalism) and my own intellectual identity (a scholar of this historical artistic style), therefore connecting different spaces and times. Charles Garoian (1999) has capitalized on his bicultural life experiences in art making when he gained awareness that “the aesthetic dimension of art was the site of inquiry (...) where I could construct my own identity and attain political agency within school, within American culture” (p.167). Janet Wolff (1995) discusses a cultural benefit of geographical dislocation, which provides intellectual expatriated women with the capacity for “integration of experience into intellectual work” (p.3). Elliot Eisner (2006) makes the more inclusive statement that within arts-based research, “The arts capitalize on the emotions and use them to make vivid what has been obscured by the habits of ordinary life” (p.11). Additionally, Desai, Hamlin, and Mattson (2010) talk about “the embodied nature of historical inquiry” (p.9), and suggest that, “Rather than conceiving of history as a distant series of events that happened to someone else, unconnected to our lives today, history is a lived understanding that merges past and present” (p.10). More recently, Claire Bishop (2012) has provided an example of a collective performance or happening echoing the artist’s biography, through the analysis of the 2005 project *Einstein Class*, by contemporary Polish artist Pawel Althamer, “a six-month project to teach physics to a group of seven juvenile delinquents in Warsaw, most of whom had been expelled from school. The tutor he selected for this task was a maverick science teacher who had recently lost his job due to his unconventional teaching style” (p.256). According to Bishop, the interactions between these two types of outcasts became an opportunity for the artist to revise “his own experience of feeling disengaged at school” in his past (pp.256-257). This experiment reveals the blurring boundaries between the situation created by a performance and the artist’s past, and illustrates how the sum can be bigger than its parts. In our specific case, the creative boundaries shift between Marco Pascarella as the author of this video-happening for *Access Denied*, me as the author of the *Access Denied* series’ general concept, and my students/participants, adding content to the happening through their chosen behaviors. Past and present merged in the intertwined biographical and cultural connections involving the past professional dialogue between Pascarella and me on American

⁶ In December 2008, Pascarella contributed an essay on American Photorealism to the Italian journal *Predella*. The article, titled “Sublime e perturbante nell’Iperrealismo storico nordamericano,” is accessible online: <http://predella.arte.unipi.it/predella24/>

Photorealism (the topic of the book used for the video happening), my bicultural identity, and my student's chosen actions on that book.

The active involvement of my art students in this happening, unknowingly performing the role of sea waves, empowered them to metaphorically purify the errors of art history by acting on my book that contained a rare, favorable interpretation of American Photorealism from a scholar. By introducing a variety of actions, students visually questioned the hegemonic course of history, to which Photorealism as subject matter and my book have been denied access, by impersonating alternative paths. The debate that followed the happening provided an opportunity for me to explain Pascarella's vision, as well as some of the historical references, and for my students to share their own perspective of what had just occurred. *Accesso Negato: Il Mare della Conoscenza* was designed as a semi-planned score, actively involving different dynamics such as Pascarella's silkscreened book jackets, copies of my art history book, my students' actions, within a structure that carries all those qualities of arts-based research summarized by James Haywood Rolling (2010), after examining an extensive literature, as "poststructural," "experiential," "performative and improvisational," "pluralistic," "proliferative and iterative," "postparadigmatic" (p.106).

The class video-happening, as designed by the artist, constituted an application of what Patti Lather (1986) would define as a "postpositivist" form of "participatory research" (p. 258), which encourages "joint participation in the exploration of research issues" (p.259). Performances in arts-based educational research should have an open structure, which "seeks to engage its viewer/participant(s) in building meanings that may, at times, exceed the researcher's own intentions" (Sanders, 2006, p. 89).

The following section combines excerpts from Pascarella's original score, the debate occurring immediately after the happening, and my post-factum reflections. The transformative nature of the art history book into a ready-made for art making allowed our class session to become at the same time an artistic experience and a debate involving art history. As G. E. Washington (2011) claims, "It is critical reflectivity that makes an analysis of performance most useful to art learning" (p.267).

The Happening and its Following Debate

The happening, overall, lasted nine minutes, followed by a class debate of twenty-five minutes. During the debate, I extrapolated Pascarella's vision for the happening from our correspondence by reading one portion of the score at a time, immediately followed by an explanation of its implications for the happening. I explained how our dialogue progressed in preparation to the event, and then disclosed my own expectations, based on my planned behavior and my observations on students' actions. Finally, I asked the students to share their

own expectations and experience on the happening.

Opening the debate was a request to clarify the title of Pascarella's project, *Accesso Negato: Il Mare della Conoscenza*, which I read aloud in Italian at the beginning. While students were familiar with the existence of the book, and the Access Denied project (as previously said, some of them chose to experiment through an individual project as well), they had no knowledge of Pascarella's intentions. During the debate, I read the opening statements from the artist's instructions:

It consists of a simple ritual that the author of the book/found object (you) must perform in a video or among an audience. You will need to put some silkscreen jackets on the book with the aim of bringing the object back into the indistinct knowledge from which it originated (see Figure 2). The book jackets, which I intend to produce with screen printing process, represent the sea" (M. Pascarella, personal communication, March 5, 2009, trans. Leda Cempellin).

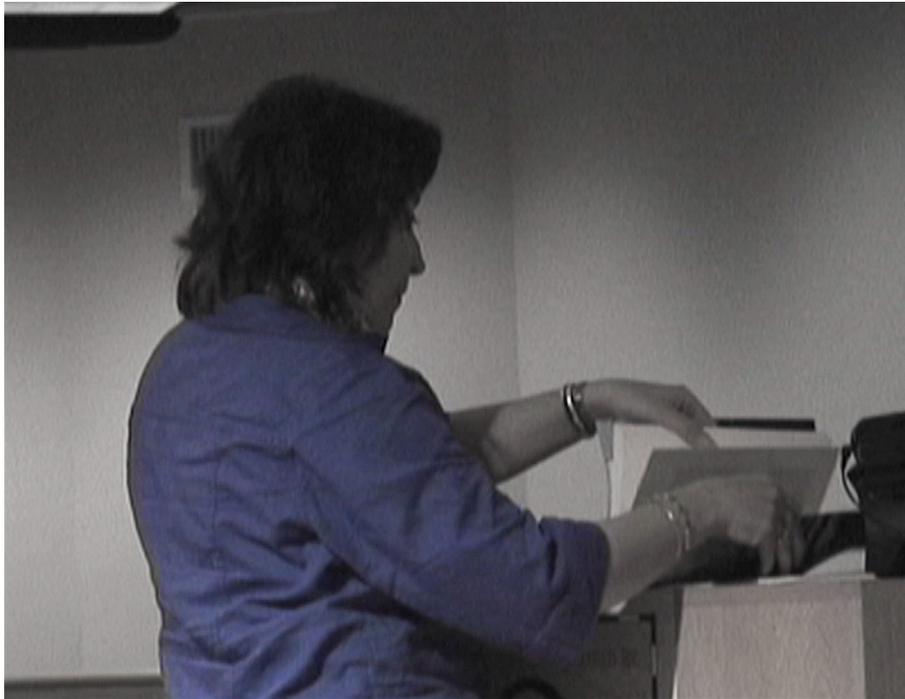


Figure 2. Marco Pascarella, Accesso Negato: Il Mare della Conoscenza, 2009.

Putting the cover on the book. Film still.

Courtesy the artist Marco Pascarella and the videographer Isaac Windham.

Richard Schechner (2002) characterizes performance as:

Ritualized behavior conditioned / permeated by play. Rituals are a way people remember. Rituals are memories in action, encoded into actions. Rituals also help people (and animals) deal with difficult transitions, ambivalent relationships, hierarchies, and desires that trouble, exceed, or violate the norms of daily life. Play gives people a chance to temporarily experience the tabu, the excessive, and the risky (p.45).

The “interactions between ritual and play” allow people to immerse themselves into a “second reality, separate from ordinary life” and even to acquire new identities (p.45).

As I explained to the class, this video happening had indeed incorporated a form of cultural ritual. It started on the classroom’s desk, which was intended to look like an altar (Figure 1). I had compiled everything in an order that intentionally looked like the *Still Life with Lemons, Oranges and a Cup of Water*, the only still life signed in 1633 by Francisco de Zurbarán (Jordan, 1985), a painter mainly working in the religious genre. The clarity of the tripartite structure chosen for this composition echoes the Holy Trinity, thus transferring a religious aura to a painting belonging to a traditionally secular genre. In a similar way, the class desk in our happening became the starting point of a secular ritual. I began the action by picking up the book from the desk. The application of the cover to the book (Figure 2) was meant to look like a ritual of sacrifice, where my traditional role as art historian among art students was challenged. Indeed, by covering my art history book I momentarily sacrificed my role of art historian to become the extension of an artist’s vision (Pascarella’s *Il Mare della Conoscenza*). Since Pascarella’s work is a reflection on my general concept for Access Denied, I assumed, with him, a co-participant role as conceptual artist in order to attract the academic interests and direct involvement of my students.



Figure 3. Marco Pascarella, Accesso Negato: Il Mare della Conoscenza, 2009. The book cover is presented to the audience/students, who become metaphor of the sea. Film still. Courtesy the artist Marco Pascarella and the videographer Isaac Windham.

Then, I continued reading Pascarella's score:

After having put the jackets to some copies of the book, you will keep them high and show them to all present (Figure 3). Then, you will be passing them very casually to the people nearest to you. The object will pass from hand to hand according to a spontaneous rite, not prompted by the officiant (Figures 5 and 6) (...). The exchange of objects between all participants in the performance is an allusion to the sea currents. The sea, as unpredictable in its various expressions, sooner or later returns what is entrusted to it (...). When all the copies will be returned to the starting point and you will have them again, then you can strip the jackets off the books and close the cycle of transformation (M. Pascarella, personal communication, April 2, 2009, trans. Leda Cempellin).

When I presented the cover to the audience (Figure 3), like an act of ritual offering, the purifying qualities of the sea (symbolized by the silkscreened book jacket visible in Figure 1) were transferred from the object-cover to the action-based audience (metaphor for the sea). The class became a metaphor of the water, which purified the Italian book (and by extension, its topic, American Photorealism) from its long-term neglect in Italy. Many cultures, across all ages, use purification rites involving water (see the numerous biblical references in Kongolo, 2001).

Pascarella's instructions included a reflection on the crucial role of my, mostly unaware, students, as metaphor of spontaneously developing sea waves, in embodying a metaphorical purificatory ritual for art history's fallacies. Through their actions, the art history book was ready-made into an art piece, within which students experienced art.

The sea becomes, necessarily, a metaphor for infinity, that dimension from which we draw the substance that, once processed, becomes idea or concept. The sea represents also the possibility for the book, imprisoned in the demeaning paths of the market and of the mass-media abuses, to come back to public attention through unpredictable currents. In this way, we would invoke the concept of art as possibility of liberation for the object that has been denied access (M. Pascarella, personal communication, March 5, 2009, trans. Leda Cempellin).

The final liberation of the book from the cover was intended as a release following the original negation of the book's contents, thus reflecting the paradox denying-releasing expressed in the general concept of Access Denied. Pascarella envisioned the students as waves or crowds that could be stimulated, but not imposed upon. Garoian (1999) summarizes a claim common to "performance theorists" that "the transformation of the artist/teacher or spectator/student from the object to the subject of cultural history requires liberatory forms of action" (p. 57). Similarly, the students became self-regulated entities that were not subjected to external domination, and therefore free to act.



Figure 4. Marco Pascarella, Accesso Negato: Il Mare della Conoscenza (2009). A moment during the Video-Happening. Film still. Courtesy the artist Marco Pascarella, the class, videographer Isaac Windham, and the South Dakota Art Museum.

During the happening I tried to point the focus on the metaphorical sea performed by my class, in order to respect Pascarella's original intent. In the debate that followed, I explained the artist's passion for Romanticism and the intent to resonate those seascapes that were part of his customary work as painter. I performed an imitation of the *Monk by the Sea*, by Caspar David Friedrich, by looking over the horizon line and beyond the waves (see Figure 4). I remained immobile to direct attention away from myself so that the video documentation could capture unpredictable actions of the students. Instead, students imitated my silence. As Allan Kaprow (1977) observed in the Seventies, happenings "generate a curious self-consciousness that permeates every gesture. You each watch each other watch each other. You watch the surroundings in detail" (p.190). This explains why one student noted, "I thought we were supposed to be quiet, because you were quiet at the beginning" (L.Hawke, personal communication, May 6, 2009).

The silence, chosen by the students, as a reaction to my compliance with Pascarella's request, revealed its paradoxical nature. Whereas my genuine intent was to "disappear" so that the students would act, the physical geography of the space seemed to perpetuate traditional mechanisms of academic power. In this auditorium classroom, the polygonal base and the radial seats that face an elevated stage situated the professor as one who towers over students in order to transmit content. The imitation of my silence further showed their concern for my approval which was represented later, in the video documentation, by videographer Isaac Windham. His deliberate choice to highlight my shirt and the book jacket, as the only colored elements in the resulting black-and-white video (see Figures 1, 2, 3, 4, 8, and 9) provided visual confirmation of the emergence of unavoidable power within the academic classroom setting.

This pedagogical stance is particularly true for academic disciplines, such as art history, where learning occurs differently from studio classes that favor discussion among peers (Aievoli, 2003). Once the teacher keeps silent, what will students do? Will they pretend to read a book they actually do not understand? Will they look at the book jacket hoping to figure something out (see Figure 7)? Intimidated by my silence and uncertain about my expectations for their handling of the book I authored, students felt compelled to imitate my behavior for a while, prior to acquiring their autonomy by becoming more active towards the end of the happening.



*Figures 5 and 6. Marco Pascarella, Accesso Negato: Il Mare della Conoscenza, 2009.
“The object will pass from hand to hand, following a spontaneous ritual”
(Pascarella, 2009). Film stills. Courtesy the artist Marco Pascarella,
the student participant, and the videographer Isaac Windham.*

Students passed the book around, for only a couple of minutes. It was returned to me in its original condition. It appeared that students had not made an emotional investment in the happening. I understood that, if I wanted my students to feel free from the imitative mechanism, I had to intervene by introducing alternative behavioral forms. I took four more copies of the book from the desk, covered them with as many silkscreened jackets and launched one to a student (who was able to catch the book, while the jacket fell to the auditorium floor), handed two books to two students in different corners of the class, and gently threw another one to the auditorium floor. Still, the books came back to the stage floor. I collected those copies and handed them to students in different corners of the class. Some

students seemed to be softly talking amongst themselves, smiling, while others began observing for longer, trying to figure something out (Figure 7).



Figure 7. Marco Pascarella, Accesso Negato: Il Mare della Conoscenza, 2009. The book raises the student's curiosity. Film still. Courtesy the artist Marco Pascarella, the student participant, and the videographer Isaac Windham.

I deliberately introduced an unexpected dramatic action when next I launched the book, more vehemently, up in the air. Doing so aroused genuine embarrassment and provoked a loud laugh from a student who was almost hit by the book (figure 8). The sudden and potentially destructive behavior disrupted my position as the art historian author by confronting students' expectations of my professional and cultural role. My actions carried the potential for what I define as "creative vandalism." I transformed my teaching role from that defined by Charles Garoian (1999) as the authoritarian "hegemonic overlord" (p.42) to that of "liminal-servant," who "functions as cultural provocateur, similar to performance artists," mediating between academic art historical knowledge transmitted in my classes and my students' artistic and "cultural backgrounds" (p.43).



Figures 8 and 9. Marco Pascarella, Accesso Negato: Il Mare della Conoscenza, 2009. As the course instructor introduces a new potentially destructive behavior, it becomes socially acceptable and consequently imitated.

Film stills. Courtesy the artist Marco Pascarella, the Spring 2009 art history seminar class, the videographer Isaac Windham, and the South Dakota Art Museum.

I explained to the students, during the debate session, that potentially destructive actions, paradoxically carrying new creative solutions, have been introduced in western art since the postwar era (Rush 1999). I cited the illustrious example of *Erased de Kooning Drawing* by Robert Rauschenberg, a reference that students became familiar with during the course. However, participant Carly Zebell (personal communication, May 6, 2009), commented, “I never really wanted to throw the book back to the stage, I was worried I would damage it.”



Figure 10. Marco Pascarella, Accesso Negato: Il Mare della Conoscenza, 2009. Students understand that they are allowed to introduce new norms, such as using the cover as a hat. Film still. Courtesy the artist Marco Pascarella, the student, and the videographer Isaac Windham.

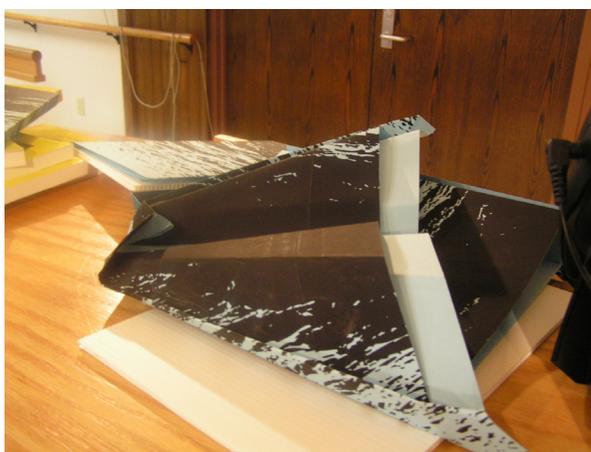


Figure 11. Marco Pascarella, Accesso Negato: Il Mare della Conoscenza, 2009. The desk, after the Video-Happening. Photo Leda Cempellin, courtesy the artist Marco Pascarella.

The symbolic gesture of tossing the book in the air initiated the progressive emancipation from imitative behaviors towards creative forms of transformation. Students launched the book back, however, some chose to remove (and keep) the book jacket. Others applied new and unexpected actions, such as wearing the book cover like a hat (Figure 10), and even drastically morphing the original book cover into something else (Figure 11). Student participant Tina McIntire (personal communication, May 6, 2009) reflected on how something activated in her a new, non-imitative behavior: “Actually, when you threw the book back at us, I caught on a little bit; I figured if I took the cover off and threw it back at you, maybe you wouldn’t be able to throw back any more. That fits the purpose of having it on there in the first place.” The censorship, initially put by me on the book by covering it, was removed and resulted in the book’s purification through the students’ hands, as a metaphor of the sea currents.

Student Isaiah Jackson (personal communication, May 6, 2009), articulated his observation on the progressive release of newly acceptable social norms in a very unfamiliar situation, in these terms:

I thought it was interesting how we all developed our own social norms: one person saw it [the book] passing to the other person, so we all decided to pass it to the other person; and she ripped the cover off, so there’s another person that tears it off.

Student Samantha Forseth (personal communication, May 6, 2009) articulated the progressive creative emancipation in these terms: “I guess I was just thinking about different directions, how things can go in different directions.”

Marco Pascarella himself (personal communication, April 8, 2009, trans. Leda Cempellin) analyzed the possible outcomes of the *Happening* prior to having it staged: “Obviously, I cannot exactly anticipate the behavior of the person you will pass the books to. This person could decide to run away with the book or to destroy it, or even to stop its circulation.” Once Pascarella received copy of the video, he saluted the outcome of this experiment with these words:

What impressed me the most is the attitude of the youths, very casual in front of an artistic ritual evoking the experiences of the avant-garde and the experiments of the late twentieth century [...]. This attitude has something epic or pioneering to it. In it you can probably find the root of the American artist’s behavior towards art (M. Pascarella, personal communication, July 2, 2009, trans. Leda Cempellin).

Conclusion

Pascarella’s *Access Denied: the Sea of Knowledge* is a work comprised of objects (the book as ready-made and book jackets as artworks) and actions (performed by the class).

The collaborative experiment provided art and graphic design students an emotional experience in an art history course through art-making. At the same time, they explored artistic dimensions of both object and action that resonated with course content. The artistic experience at the end of the course offered an embodied and emotional understanding of the dualisms of mature modernism. The biographical dimensions opened possibilities with which creative students sympathized, thus allowing them to see their art historian as an artist among them.

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