

Colette, *Postcards From the Story of my Life*, "My Room During One of Its Transformations (1975)," 1977. Photo and ink on paper, 25.4cm x 17.8cm. Image courtesy of Colette.

"I have been told that Colette's environment—and it took ten years for it to grow to what it is now—is in danger of disappearing due to the total lack of support from museums and institutions. This would be a real tragedy. It would deprive New York of one of its last poetical spots. I cannot believe that they could be blind to art and deaf to the harmony of love. For love has nested in Colette's apartment."
—Arturo Schwartz (1981)

LOVE HAS NESTED IN COLETTE'S APARTMENT

Alexis Bhagat

June 27, 2015

Dear Colette,

Sometimes we want to say everything at once, and then we can't say anything at all. That's how it's been these past few months, since I started reading into the history of your work. I was inspired to start reading deeply about your work after receiving an invitation from my friend, Nasrin Himada, to write about Madeline Gins and Arakawa for an upcoming issue of the journal *Scapegoat* on the theme of eros.

Did you know Madeline & Arakawa? They lived on Houston Street for a very long time. I imagine that you must have met them. I also imagine that you would not have had much affinity with them, since they were conceptualists beyond Conceptualism. They pursued their art together in a collaboration that led them beyond art and into architecture, into the creation of works of "Procedural Architecture,"¹ which was a kind of ultra-radical concrete poetry: philosophical propositions constructed in space. Philosophy as architecture, architecture as action: the action of re-orienting the body into a coordinated awareness of surroundings that would, in Madeline's words, "move death out of the picture."² I'm jumping to the conclusion there, because I learned about their philosophy

of "Reversible Destiny" by working for them. The conclusion was already the starting place and there was work to be done: death is immoral and the human race has got to build itself out of the inevitability of death.

My first reaction to Nasrin's invitation was "What does Reversible Destiny have to do with eros?" It didn't fit with any definition of eros as I understood it. On a personal level, the collaboration between Madeline and Arakawa was beyond erotic. (At least, when I knew them... perhaps it was different when they were younger, working on *The Mechanism of Meaning*.) And, fundamentally, Reversible Destiny was not about *desire* but about *refusal*. Madeline and Arakawa never said "I want to live forever." They always said "We have decided not to die." Eros for me is bound up with softness and dreams and night. Conversations between two people in the twilight leading to an unveiling of bodies to hands as darkness veils bodies to eyes; longing, and sometimes the satisfaction of longing, in the black night; lovers speaking in secret languages with the birds and to each other in the half-light before dawn. Eros is the power that arrests the sunrise so lovers may embrace longer before the light declares them naked, provoking them to veil themselves again to the world and each other. It's a hazy and romantic definition, which feels suspect in this century of clarity and anxiety. Nevertheless, it is my definition and I have accepted that I am a Romantic, and that this often puts me out of step with the times.

I asked myself: Is there a site or construction that exhibits this romantic definition of eros? And, I immediately thought of your *Living Environment*, with its silk and mirrors and dreams; I thought of your sleeping beauty in *Real Dream*; I thought of you silently declaring *If it takes forever, I will wait for you*.³

But, what was the Living Environment? Was it just an apartment? Was it not, as Madeline and Arakawa would call it, a *tactically posed surround*? I didn't really know. It's like you said in your *Bomb* interview: "People don't get it at first. They may be fascinated, but they don't understand."⁴

So I started reading. To understand. Reading and reading. And looking at pictures. Which led



Colette, *If It Takes Forever I will Wait for You*, 1975. Installation/performance with audio and projection. Image courtesy of Colette.



Antoine Watteau, *Pèlerinage à l'île de Cythère, dit L'Embarquement pour Cythère (The Embarkation for Cythera)*, 1717. Oil on canvas, 129cm x 194cm, Louvre Museum, Collection of the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture, Joconde # 000PE002934 (Artwork in Public Domain, Image by C2RMF, uploaded to Wikicommons by C2RMF).

Helena Kontova: Is there some relation between the romantic themes you use in your art and your life?

Colette: Yes, of course. I live in the year 1977. I am a part of this world which is not romantic at all, and I miss some kind of Romanticism. By Romanticism, I don't mean mad fools kind of emotion. I mean more balance of intellect and emotion. We are moving too fast and we don't know what we are doing in this age, and everything seems to center around the mind, even art... It's time to bring up the emotion. That's why I am very theatrical. Because just like in the play, you have to exaggerate the emotions, to make a public feel and to make things clear. That's why my work is so emotional. But at the same time, it is conceptual, it is too real. Even my life is an exaggeration, the way I dress myself. It's nothing new, art and life being together. I live practically on the stage. My apartment is a stage; it's all covered with silk.

—Helena Kontova, "Colette: The New Romantic," *Flash Art*, 1977.

me out of your work and into the past. Douglas Kahn once told me: "I wrote the book [*Earth Sound Earth Signal*] so that I could understand just what Joyce Hinterding and Alvin Lucier were doing." That is the very best kind of art history, and I feel like I have just started such a course of reading to help me understand what you are doing. A course of reading that surpasses this article.

Journeying to the past began in pursuit of *tableaux vivants*. I must confess that I had never recognized that word before I began reading into your work. I had just read Alexandra Anderson-Spivey's review of "Colette: The apARTment"⁵ and googled the term "living tableau." Encountering the rich tradition of the *tableau vivant* did not give me the pleasure of discovery that one feels when, for example, you discover some amazing musician from a previous generation. Rather, it reminded me of how severely damaged was the teaching of art history during the time of my schooling—the craze for theory and emphasis on the contemporary.

I found this quote from Goethe telling a story about the invention of the *tableau vivant*:

The Count, a keen-sighted man, soon saw through the party, their inclinations, dispositions, wishes, and capabilities, and by some means or other contrived to bring Luciana to a new kind of exhibition, which was perfectly suited to her.

"I see here," he said, "a number of persons with fine figures, who would surely be able to imitate pictorial emotions and postures. Suppose they were to try, if the thing is new to them, to represent some real and well-known picture. An imitation of this kind, if it requires some labour in arrangement, has an inconceivably charming effect."⁶

The characters in the story go on to portray *Belisarius* by Van Dyke and Poussin's *Ahasuerus and Esther*. Like the "people's mic" of the Occupy movement, *tableaux vivants* were like a "people's photocopier" reproducing paintings through embodiment. I read about the "tableau balls" of

the Mystick Krewe of Comus⁷ and the essential role of *tableaux* in their floats and pageants. I read about the American "Pageant Movement,"⁸ which once organized young women to work towards equality and women's liberation through staging *tableaux* as Columbia and Joan d'Arc. I was embarrassed that I knew nothing of these once vital art forms of tableau and pageant.

But now where is the "charming effect" in recreating "real and well-known" paintings? The communicative aspect of *tableaux vivants* became irrelevant after photographs had saturated the world with collection catalogues, postcards, posters, and other affordable reproductions of famous paintings. Abstraction had knocked Historic Painting from its pinnacle of the Fine Arts, and there were rarely people or poses to imitate in the new art. The playful aspect that had driven the game of *tableaux vivants* moved into play-acting of the sort that has made its way into fan films. People today (and in the twentieth century) don't imitate paintings—they imitate movies!

Cinema was not an *addition* to the tree of fine arts; it was a *convergence*. In the first half of the twentieth century, stories and myths communicated through diverse art forms such as painting, opera, ballet, and drama all converged into the motion picture. Convergence is an idea which was all the rage with media theorists, bureaucrats, and capitalists salivating over the smartphone, that little screen+phone+camera that billions of people around the world carry with them. (The #blacklivesmatter movement, a wild-fire ignited by cop-watching citizen filmmakers and spread through smartphones, has also cooled some of the excitement of technocrats.) Simply put, convergence as it is used in media theory is the fact that telephone, television, radio, and data infrastructures are all combining into a single network architecture. The cinema was not a technical convergence, but rather a cultural convergence, sucking up all the traditions of carnival into its single architecture, the studio-system born of Black Maria.⁹ These carnival forms did not disappear immediately. Cinema did not destroy them, but their vitality was lost, sucked up by MGM, Fox, Walt Disney.



Colette, *Transformation of the Sleeping Gypsy without the Lion* (after Rousseau), 1973. Installation/performance. Image courtesy of Colette.

"It was called *The Transformation of the Sleeping Gypsy without the Lion*. The office of Stefanotty Gallery was transformed into a totally different space which could no longer be measured or defined by the eye. The wall looked like a waterfall and was made of silk, pleated by small folds. The space was accessible through a gateway that had the appearance of underground archaeological remains. Colette herself, dressed in a puffed satin costume, was recumbent on a bed and looked like a puppet. The tableau had little resemblance to Rousseau's painting, but she explains that artists like Rousseau have stimulated her more by their lives and their spirit than by their actual paintings."

—Peter Selz, "The Coloratura of Colette," *Arts Magazine*, 1978

And the forms themselves were left behind. Looking at photos of you in *Transformation of the Gypsy without the Sleeping Lion* and *Homage to Delacroix*, I suddenly saw you picking up the *tableau vivant* as this obsolete form, available for repurposing. Did it seem that way to you?

The tradition of *tableaux vivants* was bound up with experiments in identity, art in disguise; so your choice in some way foreshadowed the many personae you would come to inhabit: Colette, Justine, Countess Reichenbach, Olympia, Lumière. Tableau is also a communicative form. What ideas were you trying to communicate? You said in early interviews (1975–1977) that you chose the figure of Liberty as a counterpoint to an aggressive feminism, that women's liberation also needed a feminine symbol of equality. This seems a continuation of the tableau tradition of the suffragette plays,¹⁰ the embodiment of Columbia and Joan of Arc.

Later, when you write the *House of Olympia* "rules" or manifesto, you are explicit about your principles.

The rules:

RETRIEVING MY HISTORY
 SELF APPROPRIATION
 COLETTESIZING THE EIGHTEEN CENTURY
 BRINGING BACK CHIVALRY AND GOOD
 MANNERS
 ART THAT ELEVATES THE SPIRIT,
 MATCHES THE FURNITURE AND REVIVES
 PORTRAITURE¹¹

These are reactionary principles—would you agree? You seem to say, "enough of this damn progress, enough of this speed!" This, too, seems like a deep feature of the tradition of *tableau vivant*, the inevitable backward look necessary for the effort to stand timelessly. I've also seen versions of *The Rules of Olympia* where the last rule is to "Revive Art Patronage." This reminds me of the Mystick Krewe of Comus, collectively one of the most important art patrons in American history, who have elevated the spirit and celebrated life through their art for 150 years. At the same time, they have persistently harkened back to the genteel age of slavery, the hierarchy

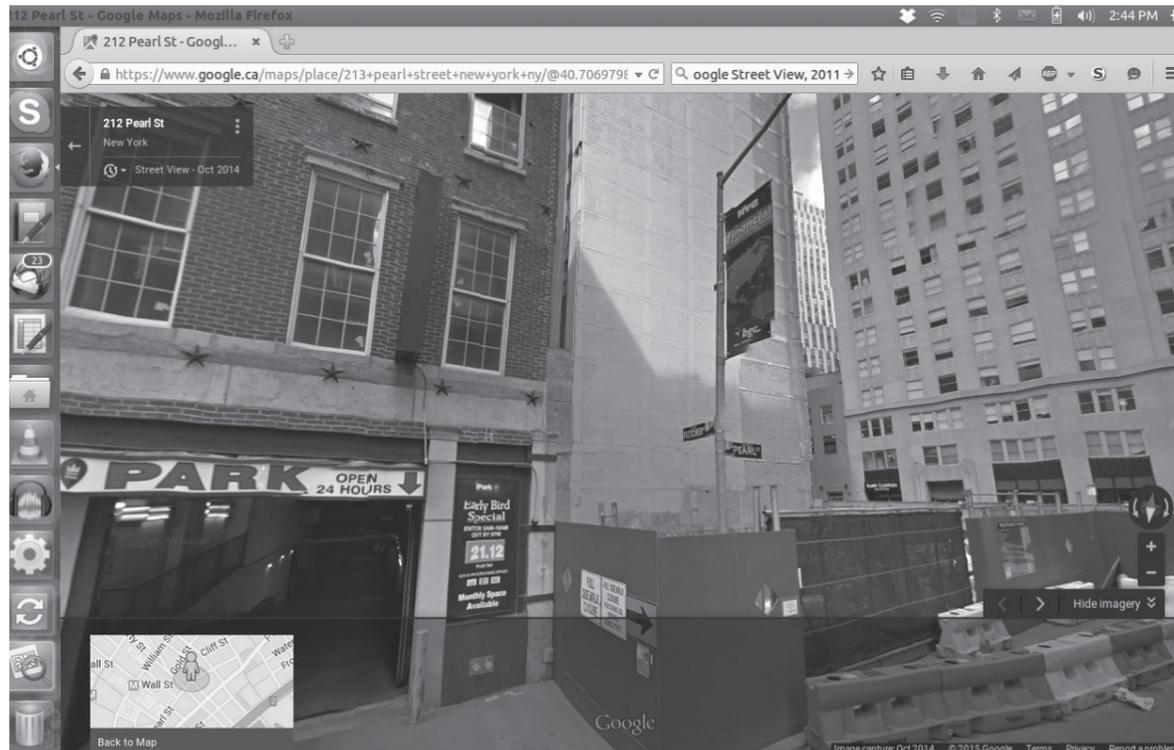
policed by such chivalry and good manners.¹²

It was all very complicated and fascinating. I spent a week meditating, if you will, as the ideas collided in my mind without turning into words. I spent hours each day staring at Wattau's *The Embarkation for Cythera* (see image) merely on a screen, since I did not have the time or money for a trip to Paris. The painting, and Wattau's reception, seemed to untie this knot for me, which extended into a line that stretched from *The Embarkation for Cythera* to Boucher to *Flaming June* to Bastien-LePage's *Joan of Arc* to the Suffragette Pageants to the Windmill Theater to Schneemann's *Eye Body*,¹³ to your *Sleeping Gypsy* and *Real Dream*.

But, this line was all in my mind. A chain of shimmering associations. I had to put it into words. I have to put it into words. Which leads me to this world, our world, full of distinctions. *Nama-rupa*, or "name and form," as the Buddhists say. I couldn't put this line, this vision, this theory into words. It was all-at-once and couldn't come out one word at a time into lines of text. Or it would come out as one word and one word only: ROCOCO.

Sincerely,

Lex



Screenshot of Google Street View, 213 Pearl Street, New York, NY (Photo: 2011)

"As one bohemia rises another dies. The latest dismal evidence of the real estate profit attack upon Manhattan's remaining rebels comes with the case of Colette. This legendary artist found fame by building her own personal world, *Maison Lumière*, an extravagant, Baroque, ultra-feminine fantasia...an acknowledged major influence on the young Jeff Koons, not to mention Madonna. Colette's salon was written up everywhere from *Vogue* to *National Enquirer*, and those who battled to have it listed as a living monument included dealer Leo Castelli. This extraordinary environment, part boudoir, part private home, has now come under the wrecking ball as the charming 1831 building that housed this womb-like wonder on the appropriately named Pearl Street has just been smashed to bits to make way for yet another damn condo."*

—Adrian Dannatt, "A Devastating Demolition," *The Art Newspaper*, 2007.

*Actually, a hotel. But as of 2014, the hotel has not yet been built.

—Lex

1 "Although our species, like every other species, has a characteristic architecture that serves its members well by increasing their chances of survival, it is far from having an architecture that could redefine life. The architecture we speak of in this book is within our species's reach. It will be a way to undo, loosening to widen and recast, the concept of person. People will not be defeatists about a condition—the human condition—about which something can be done. The procedural architecture outlined in the pages that follow will function both as spur to and mainstay of an all-out effort to alter the untenable human lot." Arakawa and Madeline Gins, *Architectural Body* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama: 2002), i-ii.

2 This was a saying of Madeline's: "[x] moves death out of the picture!" [x] could be "procedural architecture," "Bioscleave House," "coordinology" etc. I'm searching for it somewhere in her published corpus.

3 Colette, *If It Takes Forever I Will Wait for You*, 1974. Installation/Performance at Idea Warehouse, NYC.

4 Katie Payton, "Colette Lumière," *Bomb Daily*, 2 May 2013, bombmagazine.org/article/7166.

5 Alexandra Anderson-Spivey, "Colette in Transit," *Artnet*, 9 May 2007, www.artnet.com/magazineus/features/spivy/spivy5-9-07.asp.

6 Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Die Wahlverwandtschaften*, 1809, quoted from "Elective Affinities," artinfiction.wordpress.com/2013/05/30/johann-wolfgang-von-goethe-die-wahlverwandtschaften1809-elective-affinities.

7 Mystick Krewe of Comus, founded in 1856, is a New Orleans Mardi Gras krewe. It is the oldest continuous organization of Mardi Gras festivities. Comus's first night parade in 1857 introduced many of the elements that came to be equated with New Orleans Mardi Gras, including torches, marching bands, and rolling floats. See also: New Orleans Society for Tableau Vivant, *History of Tableaux*, www.notablevivant.com/about.

8 John Cullen Gruesser, *Black on Black: Twentieth-Century African American Writing about Africa* (Lexington: University of Kentucky, 2000), 60–61. See also: "The Star of Ethiopia," [Wikipedia, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Star_of_Ethiopia](http://Wikipedia.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Star_of_Ethiopia).

9 Thomas Edison's movie production studio in West Orange, New Jersey, the Black Maria (1893–1903) is widely referred to as America's "First Movie Studio."

10 Alan Taylor, "100 Years Ago, the 1913 Women's Suffrage Parade," www.theatlantic.com/photo/2013/03/100-years-ago-the-1913-womens-suffrage-parade/100465.

11 "House of Olympia, 1992–2000," www.collectcolette.com/index.php?parent_element_id=38&page_id=72.

12 "While the political views on display in these costumes are regrettable, it is hard to fault the imaginations, or the ambitions, of the men who wore them. Comus, and the other secret societies in their mold, routinely spent vast sums of money on the lavish costumes, incredible floats, and the decadent entertainments of their unique tableau balls." New Orleans Society for Tableau Vivant, *History of Tableaux*.