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 poetic 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)

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 thought of your sleeping beauty in My Room During One of Its Transformations (1975) (“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 poetic 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)"

My Room During One of Its Transformations (1975)

Photo and ink on paper, 25.4cm x 17.8cm. Image courtesy of Colette.

Colette, Postcards From the Story of my Life

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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” and googled the term “living tableau.” Encountering the rich tradition of 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.”

The characters in the story go on to portray Beliarusius by Van Dyke and Poussin’s Massaurnus and Esther. Like the “people’s mic” of the Occupy movement, tableaux vivants were like a “people’s photocopi” reproducing paintings through embodiment. I read about the “tableau balls” of the Mystik Krewe of Comus” and the essential role of tableaux in their floats and pagnants. I read about the American “Pageant Movement,” 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 photography 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, technocrats, and capitalists salivating over the smartphone, that little screen-phone-camer 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. These carnival forms did not disappear immediately. Cinema did not destroy them, but their vitality was lost, sucked up by MGM, Fox, Walt Disney.

“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.”

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, 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:

RETREIVING MY HISTORY
SELF APPROPRIATION
COLETTE'SIZING THE EIGHTEEN CENTURY
BRINGING BACK CHIVALRY AND GOOD MANNERS
ART THAT ELEVATES THE SPIRIT,
MATCHES THE FURNITURE AND REVIVES PORTRAITURE

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 harked back to the genteel age of slavery, the hierarchy policed by such chivalry and good manners.

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 unite this knot for me, which extended into a line that stretched from The Embarkation for Cythera to Boucher to Flameng June to Bastien-LePage’s Joan of Arc to the Suffragette Pageants to the Windmill Theater to Schneemann’s Eye Body, 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
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 defined 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 definition.

2. This was a saying of Madame’s; [x] means death out of the picture! [x] could be procedural architecture,” “Blockhouse House,” “corresponding,” etc. I’m searching for it somewhere in her published corpus.


7. Mystical Kings of Comus, founded in 1864, is a New Orleans Mardi Gras krewe. It is the oldest continuous organization of Mardi Gras feasters. Comus’s first night parade in 1867 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.notableevent.com/about.

8. John Callen Gravenor, Black on Black: Twentieth-Century African-American Writing about Africa (Lexington, University of Kentucky, 2000), 86–81. See also: Maria (1893–1903) is widely referred to as America’s “First Movie Studio.”

9. Thomas Edison’s movie production studios in West Orange, New Jersey, the Black Maria (1895–1903) is widely referred to as America’s “First Movie Studio.”


12. Maria (1893–1903) is widely referred to as America’s “First Movie Studio.”

13. Carolee Schneemann, Eye Body: 50 Transformations Annex 1966. Schneemann writes: “I wanted my actual body to be combined with the work as an integral material—a further dimension of the construction... I am both image maker and image discovered by my creative female will.” www.caroleeschneemann.com/eyebody.html.