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Trance Art and Other Possessions

by Chris Danowski and Laura González

ABSTRACT

How can one be reflexive when examining something from inside the object of research?

In 2010, I finished a project researching seduction. The road to completion was tortuous as I found that in studying seduction, I was being seduced; that is, led astray. I was, simultaneously, subject and object of the research. I was in a trance, obsessed and possessed by the object of study. Rather than compromise, I turned this problem into an asset, devising a methodology to study wicked phenomena from within. I called this the self-reflexive methodology. It has three steps: recognition, capture and reflection, which can be enacted in a variety of fields as well as methods or media. For this project, I chose writing, psychoanalytic practice and performative photography. Following a presentation of the methodology and the works produced as part of the seduction project, my aim is to see whether this methodology can be applied to the pedagogical practices I have developed at Transart Institute and, in particular, to the relation between supervisor and supervisee I experience with Christopher.

In 2010, I thought that a research project into trance and performance was beyond me. I would occasionally have flashes that this body of studio work might be leading to larger questions, but I was always sidetracked by mirrors. I followed the mirror's reflection until it led me to Desire. Desire is losing one's navigational star, but this time, it led me to where I was trying to go in the first place. I let myself be seduced into the possibility that conscious repetitions might lead to new connections. But I needed a methodology. I didn't have the patience (haha there's a pun in here) for psychoanalysis, the training for ethnography, or the deep background for phenomenology, but perhaps a combination of all three would lead to something. Eventually, I found that a self-reflexive methodology might capture my attention and that this would need further reflection. But I didn't know I was already captured.



LG Let's start with possessions before we get into a trance or approach art. Possessions can be both liberating—for one can let go, let someone else do the work—and scary—for one is not oneself anymore. But possession is not only possession by a spirit. It can also mean custody and ownership. I am sure you will understand if I told you that, during my doctoral research process, which took five years and I completed in 2010,² I was often referred to as obsessed, possessed, in a trance. Possessed by knowledge, I hope.

CD The metaphor (sometimes metonym?)³ of possession is a useful one, one that can withstand iterations and unpackings in multiple directions; taking the idea of possession from a very specific cultural perspective might open up unexpected metaphors. Spirit possession in Caribbean contexts⁴ (by this I mean, with roots in Africa, a new birth in the Caribbean under crisis during the slave trade, and the subsequent migrations to the rest of the Americas and the world at large) is almost unequivocal about the subject-object relationship. The Orisha, the Loa, the Goddess or God, or Ancestor spirit, is the subject, entering into the world of human culture by turning someone into an object.

In many of these traditions (if not most), the one being possessed is an initiate into the mysteries of their particular deity. In Vodun, the initiate is called the horse, and the Loa (goddess or god) is the rider.⁵ The horse submits to the rider. In Yoruba culture and Yoruba-derived cultures, the initiate is called the *lyawo*, bride of the secret, or the orisha's junior-wife,⁶ and it is always Bride, no matter the initiate's biological sex or the gender of the deity. It is not a casual metaphor. The bride submits to the deity. While this points out certain inherent gender biases, most of which are far too complicated for the purposes of this work, it also points out some ideas about possession that might be applied to research work.

As scholar-artists, we become married to the idea, the thought, the knowledge, of our study; we submit to it with an implicit understanding that our research is something that will overwhelm us. The subtext is always that we will one day become completely possessed by these thoughts.

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The promise of being possessed becomes stronger once we start to meet others along the academic and artistic path, those who are possessed by the same ideas, or similar ones: the idea's sisters, or cousins. We have been seduced to the point where we are, in a sense, marrying into a family.

Once a child of Oshun (the orisha of love, of honey and rivers) has been possessed by her, they do seem to become especially talented in charming someone. Like a spell. Being under a love spell is not the same thing as being possessed, but there are some similarities and it is not at all casual that one who has been submitting to a goddess becomes capable of charming someone into submitting to their own charms. Being possessed and being charmed are both echoes of the same counter-moves in a dance of seduction. Those who know the ceremony are given the secrets to take someone else into that space, that sacred space, where there is only you and the thing that is calling you.

He starts to miss the one he never met, so he constructs an image of her, and leaves the image in front of his altar. He says: this one here, if she is in this world, bring her to my table, and let me recognize her by how she might capture me in her eyes.⁷

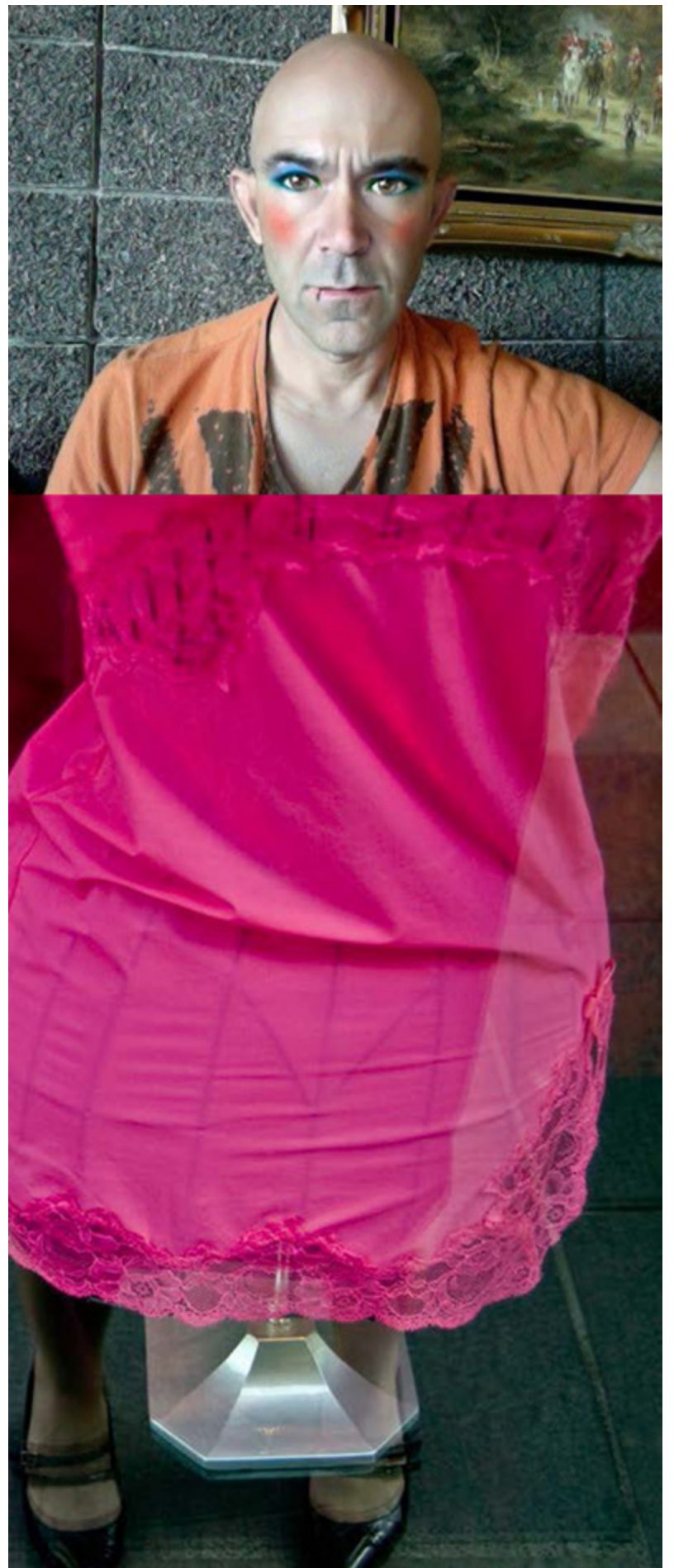
LG Then, my object of study was seduction, which is a principle (Jean Baudrillard wrote ‘everything is seduction and nothing but seduction’),⁸ a phenomenon, a process and a practice—that of Eros, of Casanova, of Valmont and the Marquise de Merteuil, of de Sade and many others. The most comprehensive yet open definition comes from Rex Butler, who, paraphrasing Baudrillard wrote that seduction is ‘the getting of another to do what we want, not by force or coercion, but by an exercise of their own, though often mistaken or misguided, free will’.⁹ As you can see, the definition is complex, as seduction is something that applies to many fields of study, from criminology to marketing, from philosophy to popular psychology and, of course, psychoanalysis. Not to forget dance, the arts and love.

CD It was always my intention to be the subject of the research, just as my subjects were selected because of their desire to maintain their subject-positions. But I forgot something essential in this: that the subject becomes possessed, becomes the object of desire. The subjects of this research are objects and subjects all at once, at the same time.

When you are under a spell, you can tell yourself that you are doing things under your own volition, under your own free will, but of course you’re not. This is true even when you are aware that you are under a spell, when you enter the space of the spell voluntarily. Perhaps it is even more true then because you can convince yourself it’s nothing outside of your control.

When someone wakes up from a spell, one they haven’t entered through conscious consent, the reaction is just as you would suspect. They realize they have been manipulated and it’s not very pretty. You would be surprised how many people still try to put spells on others because the results are always like this. A great love affair will crash and burn horribly someone who was once anxious but has been lured out of anxiety through a spell will go back to being anxious again, because even a self-destructive repetition is one worth repeating if it seems to come from free will.

When you wake up from a spell that you have entered consciously, the effect is very different and very peculiar. Your desire, your wishes, and your free will, become tangled in a dance of mirrors. You have been inside the fun house, but upon awakening, you realize that the fun house was not a particular thing for a particular situation, but closer to how things really are, closer to how you really experience your own



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desire. The mirror is like the perfume, full of seductive potential, but absolutely without power until it merges with the scent already percolating in the pulse points of the skin. And then you start to see that seduction is a science, and an art, and anyone who experiments in this science-art inevitably becomes a participant.

LG Yet, there are a number of constants in all the literature available on the topic and I established four rules of seduction.

First rule: seduction belongs to objects. This principle has been best articulated by Baudrillard in *Fatal Strategies*: ‘only the subject desires; only the object seduces’. Seduction and desire are not discrete terms, but continuous with each other. They seem to relate to each other as if part of a moëbius strip, a topological surface with one single side and only one boundary component. As the two sides are continuous, a cross over, from inside to outside and back is possible. However, when one passes a finger round the surface of the moëbius strip, it is impossible to say at which precise point the crossing has taken place. To paraphrase Slavoj Žižek, seduction is not a simple reverse of content, ‘we encounter it when we progress far enough on the side’ of desire itself. Seduction, in and through Jacques Lacan’s objet petit a—the object cause of desire, not the object to which desire is directed, but that which provokes desire—seduces desire and then moves on.]

Second rule: the choice of an object of seduction depends on the individual subject. Seduction is something that is not fully generalizable. There is no one seductive object, other than the Lacanian objet petit a, although some objects (technological, fashion objects) stand for it for a wide variety of people.

Third rule: seduction is seductive. In order to seduce, one has to be seduced first. Baudrillard wrote: ‘the illusion that leads from the one to the other is subtle. Is it to seduce, or to be seduced, that is seductive? But to be seduced is the best way to seduce’. Seduction is a matter of two and in this doubling up, there is a reversibility. It takes place between a viewer—singular—and the work of art.

Fourth rule: seduction is pervasive, it will seduce everything, especially my attempts to study it. How can one overcome this? Well, the answer, as Baudrillard ascertained, is to be seduced, to allow oneself to be seduced, however, with a tool that facilitates the capture of the moment of seduction.

And the capture of the moment of seduction is enabled by what I called the self-reflexive methodology. It is comprised of three steps.

CD Working with the idea that performance is an act of seduction, one that plays on itself through many layers of enchantment, I had to abandon the idea of the spell as a metaphor, What if the metaphor were removed and there was just the spell? What if the performers are under a literal spell? Spells work by drawing the object close, so there is no distance and no memory of a time when one was not under a spell. First, I needed an object, and a mirror seemed like a fine place to start. Second, the subjects needed to maintain a sense of their own subjectivity, so they would have a sense of choosing their objects of seduction. Third, in order for a charm to work, one has to be charming. And fourth, since there is no outside, and every indication that this process would lead to some kind of tangled mess, we all had to agree that there was a common point of capture: the space inside the performance.

LG The first step is recognition. For recognition—the seduction per se—to take place, the subject has to identify, see and accept herself within the object, or the object as a part of herself that is beyond herself, a surplus. It is in this recognition that the psychodynamic elements of seduction begin to take place and the imaginary awakens to the possibilities seduction offers. For this to happen—and, by extension, for recognition to occur—the subject has to position herself in such a way as to be able to see herself through the other. Real and imaginary worlds, just like seduction and desire, have to enter into a reversible relation.

In the corner of this cafe, he is a little bit more than surprised when she says, ‘I am your mirror, even though you can never really see yourself,’ and he is seeing his reflection in her eyes, and he sees that this is going to be a problem.

The second is capture. Capture in this context refers to two processes: the literal capture of the subject by the object (part of the process of seduction) and the recording of this operation (part of the method of studying seduction).

And what makes things worse, so much worse, is that when she leaves, she takes his image with her, and even worse than that, he has her image in the corner of his eye, and it will be awhile before he even notices.

The last step is reflection. While the other two steps are relatively descriptive, reflection is the most difficult one to complete. But it is the one that will ascertain that seduction did happen, through relating recognition and capture to the context in which seduction operates. The framework for this analysis comes from various sources, from the psychoanalytic free association, and evenly hovering attention to that developed by the artist Daniel Spoerri in his work *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance*.

She is constructing a negative image of him, one suitable for reproduction. When she misses him, she stares at the image until her eyes start to water and then stares at a blank wall. When she blinks, his image comes to her,¹⁰ and that's where it lives, in the blink of an eye, in every blink of her eye, while time is moving forward and he is disappearing and so is she.


LG Photography,¹¹ writing and psychoanalysis (not only as a body of theory, but as a practice one engages in) have been the media that have best worked for me for the second step, the capture, the key link between recognition and reflection. But can this methodology also be applied to our relation, to the very particular practice of supervision? When I recognise something in you and you in me, can we capture it to reflect on it? We are both artists, performers, and between 2005 and 2010 I went through what you are going through in your research.

CD I was not so sure (how can you be Saussure?) because I had read theories of mirrors, the ones that work backwards and forwards in time like little reflecting angels of history, but I had not yet looked up from the books long enough to look into the mirror. This is like a reflection, a reflection of a year of initiation, when one is forbidden to look into mirrors. In this case, in this work, I would not have recognized anything that I saw in those mirror spaces except for reflections of rooms that had very little to do with me.

So I thought.

However, after living inside the mirror for longer than a year now, I see that the things that were being reflected have everything to do with me. And the spells that I may have cast, intentionally and unconsciously, have captured me as much as anything. I thought I could look inside of this Pandora's box without having to speak about the magician's hand behind the tricks because I thought that I was enchanted by the tricks. But the tricks are just tricks. And when I can see the hand, I am spellbound, and suddenly, I am not trying to expose something that is unseen. I see what you were showing me and it's all in the sleight of hand, isn't it? It's what the hand is doing. It's the hand that's pressing the button on the camera. It's not the mirror, but the hand that holds the mirror, isn't it?

This is like a reflection, a reflection of a year of initiation, when one is forbidden to look into mirrors.



LG In the clinical setting, the term ‘transference’ refers to the relationship between patient and analyst as it develops during treatment. In analysis, as something is transferred, from past to present, into the room where the analysed finds herself and to the person of the analyst, situations are worked through not by remembering, but by re-living and re-enacting them.¹² Of course, transference is evident in most relationships (friends, teaching situations, our supervision relation) but the context of analysis, the privileged enclosure,¹³ the rules of engagement, and the analytic hour¹⁴—the tool of analysis, which allows unseen things to be made visible—heighten it. The same is true of the supervision. Transference has a transforming effect. If transference is love, as Freud asserted, that love is first and foremost a love of knowledge (*wissentrieb*).¹⁵ The problem is how to make that knowledge visible to others.

In our writing to each other, in particular, we involve the reader in a play of mirrors. We are many, enacting—or, shall I say, acting out—seduction, falling for it while making the text fall for us. Françoise Collin already used this strategy when she wrote ‘to write is to enter into seduction’.¹⁶ Yet, there are some writings that are more conducive to this—letters, detective stories, case expositions, and, of course, dialogues—as they quite directly address the reader. Our structures circle around the scopic and invocatory drives, between gaze and voice.¹⁷

You write to try to capture me, by writing things that I want to hear. I don’t get caught, I’m not easy to seduce with flattery (no careful reader is easy to seduce), but flattery does get my attention. I am seduced at that moment when, in getting lost in your trying to write me, I start to find tics, stutters, and gaps,¹⁸ those moments where, in a blink, it looks as though you and I were both seduced by the same thing. A blink of an eye when we were both possessed by something that we’ll never understand.



LG Yet, we need a distancing device, a forensic look into our case in which we are both the subject and the object; we are not exploring what we research, but how we research with each other. Becoming the centre of our own process, although we tend to resist it, is absolutely necessary. As Roger Lewinter writes ‘indeed, one is never tempted—seduced—but by oneself’.¹⁹

The relationship between desire and its object is negative and aporetic, we desire what we cannot have and this structure also characterises gaze and voice.²⁰ Both are essence-less objects, areas of analytical impossibility and theoretical resistance. They have the function of interpellation as they are related to the experiences of addressing and being addressed. The experience of being addressed is imposed from the outside and cannot be readily defended against. For that reason, voice and gaze can become invasive and threatening. The self-reflexive methodology, like the analytic couch amongst other things, helps to modulate this experience, to keep you and I separate.²¹

CD The performance space is a space where spells happen, where the dead come back to life, where the living lose their bearings and forget themselves, and performers seem charmed with an irresistible magnetism.²² It is like an opening into a timeless space, where the symbolic gives way to the imaginary, and the real that is lurking beneath the foundation starts to peek in.²³ But performance ends. Everyone will leave, eventually. And the thing that seduced us and possessed us is gone, because we can’t stay there, because no one can hold a goddess in their head for very long, the dividing line comes up, it has to, when it doesn’t, that’s the kind of thing that kills people like Marilyn Monroe. We can’t stay there.

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LG There is always something that remains un-writeable, un-recordable, something beyond symbolization when speaking of seduction. This is because of our own involvement in it. As Maurice Olander and Jacques Sojcher write, it is as if, beyond the theories and the seducers, seduction had the last word.²⁴

I was lying on a straw mat in the corner of my godfather’s living room. I was wearing all white, and I would be in this small corner for the next seven days. I was listening to my godfather, a child of Oshun, the orisha of love, talking to my godbrother, a child of Oshun; and my godmother, also a child of Oshun, was quiet. My godbrother started talking about all the different kinds of love magic he knew, all the spells he had used to capture someone’s heart. He had a long list. We all pretend that we are not witches, but of course, we are. Eventually, my godmother, the oldest, who had been a priestess for more than thirty years, interrupted. She said, ‘all those spells are good, I know they work, but there is one you haven’t mentioned yet, and that one is my favorite.’ My godbrother was thinking for a bit, then gave up, and asked her, ‘what is it?’ She said, ‘that’s the one where you tell the girl that you like her.’

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ENDNOTES

- The images in this text are composites worked from source material from the authors. They mirror the conversation. We have chosen to leave them unreferenced as they do not reference anything outside themselves.
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- For example, Steve McGough, 'How does this work? Stare at the red dot and see the woman in full color on the wall', *Radio Vice Online*, 25 January 2012. Available from: <<http://radioviceonline.com/how-does-this-work-stare-at-the-red-dot-and-see-the-woman-in-full-color-on-the-wall/>> [accessed 21 August 2013].
- For details of the photobook, submitted for Laura González's PhD, see Laura González, *Make Me Yours* [photobook], available from <<http://www.lauragonzalez.co.uk/make-me-yours/>> [accessed 27 August 2013].
- Listen to Adam Phillips in Lisa Appignanesi, *Freudian Slips, 4: Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*, [Radio Programme] BBC, first aired on Thursday 17 March 2005 at 3.45pm, available from <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/science/freudianslips.shtml>> [accessed 13.08.13].
- '[W]hat is exemplified here is the privileged enclosure. At one level the analytic space, behind closed doors, the locus of seduction, a place of the wildness of intimacy, for believe it or not, all this does exist, which is not to say that it happens to all.' Chris Oakley, 'A Disturbance of Memory on the Acropolis – A Response', in *In the Place of an Object*. Edited by Kivland and du Ry JCFAR, pp. 141–160, p. 149.
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- For an example of a Lacanian conversation: Chris Danowski and Claire Sanchez, *clarity (approximately)*, 2013, available from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7lndOPC_mDg> [accessed 21 August 2013].
- 'En effet, on n'est jamais tenté—séduit—que par soi.' Roger Lewinter, 'La comédie magnétique', in Maurice Olender and Jacques Sojcher (eds), *La séduction*, Paris: Aubier Montaigne, 1980, pp. 11–15, p.15. My translation.
- Jacques Lacan, 'The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire', *Écrits. The First Complete Edition in English (Écrits* [1966]), tr. by Bruce Fink, New York, London: W.W. Norton, 2006, pp. 671–702, p. 691.
- Belgian psychologist and anthropologist Francis Martens wrote: 'C'est ainsi que la séduction, le miroir et le masque ont aussi fonction de vérité et de dévoilement'; it is thus that seduction, the mirror and the mask also have a function of truth and unveiling. Francis Martens, 'Éloge de la grimace', in Maurice Olender and Jacques Sojcher (eds), *La séduction*, Paris: Aubier Montaigne, 1980, pp. 25–34, p. 29. My translation.
- Chris Danowski and Natalia Jaeger, TIMB surrealcouple, 2006, available from <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BvsK9X0Q0bE>> [accessed 21 August 2013].
- Christopher Danowski, twitch, 2011, available from <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nZ9z49n6Q7I>> [accessed 21 August 2013].
- 'Le concept ici y laisserai de ses plumes, [...] la séduction ainsi aurait le dernier mot'; the concept would leave here some of its feathers, [...] seduction would thus have the last word. Maurice Olender and Jacques Sojcher (eds), 'Préface', in *La séduction*, Paris: Aubier Montaigne, 1980, pp. 7–10, p. 7. My translation.